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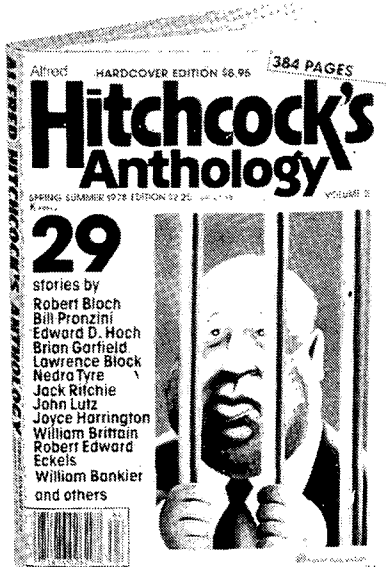
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VOLUME 23, NO. 6

JUNE 1978

**ALFRED**  
**HITCHCOCK'S**  
**MYSTERY MAGAZINE**

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June 1978



Dear Reader:

June is a month that promises summer vacations—trips to the sea-side or perhaps an ocean voyage. Then again, you may want to stay home and tend your garden.

This month's issue features these, tinged here and there with dark comedy, and more. You'll find distinguished detectives and bungling crooks, as well as an interesting old man whose paintings have an unusual quality. You'll wander the streets of an amazing town where murder is never committed. You'll even have occasion to recall the end of the Vietnam War with a dire incident that occurs as Saigon is falling.

All in all, the summer should begin to look more exciting to you—and more dangerous.

Good reading.

*Alfred Hitchcock*

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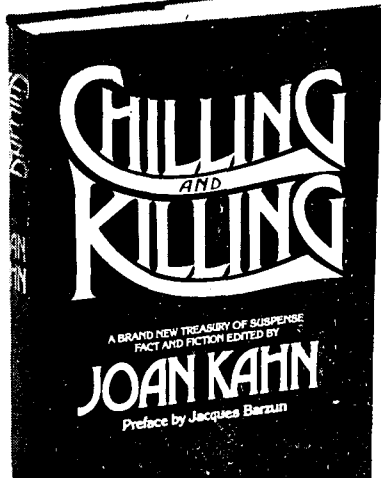
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*She was the least liked individual in the troupe, by both men and women . . .*

# THE LAST ACT WAS DEADLY

by  
**WILLIAM  
BANKIER**



The rooming house stuck away on a back street in Brighton had nothing going for it, not even a view of the sea. But it served meals all day, something rare for English eating places, and the front door had a homely appeal, so Eric Tennyson walked under the enamelled sign advertising "Bed and Breakfast," pushed open the lace-curtained door, and went inside.

He knew it was a good choice the minute he entered the vestibule.



The cooking smells, the fringe of tattered carpet meeting a crust of worn linoleum, the thickly overpainted woodwork, and the patterned wallpaper populated with framed faded photographs all reminded him of the house he had grown up in back in Vermont. He chose a table in the empty dining room and sat down on a hard caneback chair. The table, covered with a flowered cloth, teetered under his elbows.

A tall grey woman in a black-and-white uniform under a thin cardigan came into the room and stood over him with tiny fists clenched against her chest. She looked at him fondly and Tennyson was ready to be asked if he had done his homework and to get his skates off the kitchen floor. He glanced at the menu and ordered cod and chips.

"Do you want that with bread and butter and a cup of tea? You get cod-and-chips-and-bread-and-butter-and-a-cup-of-tea, 85 pence."

"Lovely," Tennyson said. "I'll have that." He had been long enough in London to learn to say "lovely."

The food came and the crisp brown slabs of breaded fish were quite simply the most delicious he had ever tasted. He soaked on the vinegar and salt, took a bite from a triangle of buttered bread, slurped a swallow of strong tea, and began really to enjoy himself.

It was a perfect example of the rewards that can come from obeying an impulse. The idea of taking this day-trip to Brighton had only occurred to him at breakfast. The sky was clear, Capital Radio said no rain all day, and his writing schedule was up to date, so he was free to walk to Wimbledon Station, take a train to Clapham Junction, and transfer there to the Brighton express. One hour later he was at the seaside—in June, before the main press of tourists.

Tennyson could hardly stop congratulating himself. His main venture during the afternoon had been a walk along the cliffs to the village of Rottingdean, three miles away. Here he drank lager in a couple of pubs, wandered the tidy streets, and spent an hour in and around a church that dated back to the Saxons.

Then he bussed back to Brighton and roamed the Palace Pier, dropping pennies into the sweeper machines, hoping to cause a penny avalanche over one of the ledges, eating licorice allsorts from a bag in his pocket, lying in a deck chair with his face to the sun.

He even entered the little toy house of Eva Montenegro, the famous Romany clairvoyant, and paid £3 to have his fortune told. She sat opposite him, grainy-faced and clear-eyed, warning him not to put his

hands where she had just spilled her tea. Then she nattered on with a stream of consciousness that could have been about him, reading his reactions he supposed, shaping her talk according to the way his shrugs or eyebrows guided her.

One thing she said surprised and pleased him. "You do some writing—you are a clerk?"

"Not a clerk. I do write."

"Ah. You will write a good story. A big story will be a big success."

Tennyson wandered on the seafront afterwards with eyes half closed, his mind floating on her prediction. The dramatic society in Wimbledon had agreed to perform his play in the fall. It was only an amateur group, to be sure, and there would be no money in it. But he didn't require money. What he craved was success and here was the gypsy telling him he would have it.

Empty plates were taken away, the woman brought him a dish of apple pie with hot custard, and the delightful supper went on.

Then everything crashed as Tennyson looked up through the doorway into the vestibule and saw Meredith Morgan. He wanted to hide beneath the table. Of all people—the one member of the Hartfield Dramatic Society who really put him off—and here she was, not ten feet away. Fortunately, she had not seen him yet.

And what was this? She set a large suitcase at her feet and, raising her voice, she called straight ahead into the body of the house, "Hello? Anybody is at home, yes?"

Tennyson stopped tasting what he was eating. The accent was pure German, strong and true. Could it be Meredith Morgan's continental double? No, it was herself—it had to be. He had seen her only last week at a cast reading.

An invisible landlord made terms for a single room and Tennyson could hear Meredith hissing her stagey German as she signed the book. Then she reappeared beyond the dining-room doorway to claim her suitcase and Tennyson turned his head hard away. When he looked again, she was gone and he heard footsteps on a stairway.

There was absolutely no doubt in his mind that this was the Morgan girl and here she was in Brighton pretending to be a German tourist. Tennyson was intrigued now that the immediate danger of having to spend time with her was past. Not that there was much chance of her



trapping and boring him; she was surely less anxious to meet him than he was to meet her.

But what was she up to? Tennyson finished his pie, scraping the last of the yellow custard from the dish, and considered the possibilities. The most preposterous occurred to him first. She was some sort of a spy. But that made no sense at all. If she did some work for M15 or whoever, she might end up in Berlin playing the part of a German. But in Brighton?

Perhaps it was a romantic involvement. She had a boy friend who, for some reason, thought she was from Germany and she was here for a liaison, carrying on the charade. But Meredith with a boy friend, secret or otherwise, was hard to swallow. She was the least-liked individual in the Hartfield, by both men and women, and she took no pains to make herself more appealing.

Then Tennyson thought of a far-fetched notion that might explain her behavior. Somewhere down the road the Society was going to do a play in which there was a female part demanding a German accent. Meredith wanted the role so she had come here to live for a few days as a German, getting dialect practice all day long. Possible but, on second thought, doubtful. She could do this in London—no need to come to Brighton.

Tennyson paid for his supper and went outside. He had gone a dozen paces down the cobbled lane when the impulse hit him and he returned, entering a pub opposite the rooming house, ordering a pint at the bar, and taking it to a table near the front window. He sat down and began watching the painted doorway. It had become very important for him to learn why Meredith Morgan was in Brighton, pretending to be Marlene Dietrich.

As he drank his beer, Tennyson remembered his early days in England, over a year ago. He had settled in Wimbledon simply because the name of the place meant something to him from years of following tennis. And it had lots of Underground and British Rail trains to and from London. Since his aim in life was to become a successful playwright, now that he was financially independent for a few years thanks to a state lottery win, it made sense for Tennyson to become involved with a theatrical group. The West End was beyond him at present, so it had to be an amateur society.

That was how he came to seek out the Hartfield. They were a friendly group and apparently happy to accept a good-looking, 28-year-old American, although his accent certainly did not blend with theirs onstage. Now, after playing small parts in three productions, Tennyson had made the breakthrough he was seeking; they were going to do his play, *Call It Love*, as their September production. It was a romantic comedy, set in Wimbledon, with a tennis background.

As a group, the Hartfield could only be called jovial. They kidded Tennyson about some of his pronunciations, praised his forceful acting style, and waved to him on the street. He was on a cheek-kissing basis with most of the girls. But not with Meredith Morgan. At first, he took the conversational initiative with her and attributed her monosyllabic replies to shyness but after a while he tired of it and stopped speaking to her—let her make the effort.

Onstage, at the close of one play, he found himself placed next to her in the curtain-call lineup. Automatically, as they bowed, he took the hand of the person on either side of him. Meredith's hand, cold and claw-like, tore itself free and he did not touch her again.

There was movement in the doorway across the street. Meredith emerged dressed in shades of blue—a tight T-shirt, short skirt, and plastic boots. This was nothing like what she wore back in Wimbledon and Tennyson felt a quickening of his heartbeat as he finished his beer and left the pub.

She turned left at the main road and wandered down the hill towards the seafront. It was becoming dark and strings of lights sparkled along the broad walk. Beyond, the English Channel, flat on this calm night, was fading to black. Tennyson was not surprised to see pedestrians, men and women, turning to look at the attractive girl in blue as they passed her.

This new style of hers puzzled Tennyson as much as anything, because at rehearsals Meredith was a mouse. His impression of her there, whenever he bothered to look, was of furtive brown eyes, unwashed short brown hair, hungry cheeks, and sloping posture, usually with an inch or two of unstitched hem at the bottom of her skirts.

Now she swaggered ahead of him, swinging a red plastic handbag, trailing her fingertips on building fronts—arrogant, provocative. Tennyson worked to control his breathing as he followed her into a pub

called The Cutlass. He used his head and came in right after her, reasoning that given time she would be seated and possibly watching the door.

He was able to watch her order a gin and tonic and carry it to a table in an alcove. Tennyson brought his beer with him and sat on the other side of the upholstered parapet where he could see and hear the girl without being seen, unless she turned fully around.

The action was not long in starting. Meredith finished her drink quickly and set down the empty glass. A middle-aged man, heavy-set and grey-headed, took his own glass and reached for hers. "Same again, love?" he said. His accent was from somewhere up north.

"Thank you, you are very kind. It is gin and tonic."

He returned with the refills and hers looked like a double. "Cheers, love," he said, and after they drank he went on, "Well then, how do you like our country?"

"I am only here one day but it is very good. The people are so friendly."

"Famous for it," the man said. "And where's home?"

"I come from Hamburg. That is in Germany."

"I know where Hamburg is."

"Ah, you have been there?"

"Yes, but not to stay. I flew over in a Lancaster, long before you were born. All I saw was a lot of fires burning." He was well away on the beer and the effect of it could be heard in his voice.

Meredith paused, looking at her hands. Then she said, "It was, as you say, before I was born. But I find it hard to believe that our people could be enemies."

"My dear," the man said, "you are not going to find *anybody* to be *your* enemy."

She laughed at that and their foreheads almost touched as they leaned close together. Tennyson listened to a lot more of the same and then, when the two of them left the pub, he was relieved. The situation was obvious enough; the Morgan girl was one of these shy people who like to get away and play games under the protection of an assumed identity. So be it, and more power to her. Anyway, Tennyson had to hurry to get a late train back to London.

Next day, he worked all morning at his romantic comedy. Now that

the group had agreed to perform the play, Tennyson was scared to death; it was simply not good enough. At half past one, he went out to his local for a pint and some food, picking up a newspaper on the way. He took a Ploughman to his favorite corner table and began enjoying the tangy cheddar cheese, pickled onion, and crusty bread and butter washed down with cool lager.

Then he saw the photograph on page three and the food went sour in his mouth. It looked a lot like the man who was buying drinks for Meredith Morgan last night. But it was the caption under the photograph that shook Tennyson—

### BRIGHTON VISITOR STABBED TO DEATH

He read the story and learned the Leeds businessman had been found a few yards from the entrance to a culvert under one of the piers, dead of multiple stab wounds. Robbery was not a motive—he still had his money.

Tennyson stopped reading and stopped eating. He had to make a decision. The obvious thing to do was to go to the police. But there were unanswered questions that impeded him. First, what if the girl was not Meredith? He was ninety-eight percent sure, but that left a devilish two percent.

Worse still, what if it was her, and the man had been bushwhacked after he left her? By setting the police on her, Tennyson would be causing the girl all kinds of trouble for nothing.

For nothing? She might be able to tell the police something that would help them find the killer. That was worth a little inconvenience. Tennyson tossed the problem back and forth in his mind till three o'clock closing, by which time he was three pints further along on the day's high, but no-closer to a solution on Morgan.

So he decided to visit the girl and give her a chance to explain. In German or otherwise. He left the pub and wandered on down past Ely's display windows, past the station, and on along the Broadway to the entrance to Meredith's flat. Months ago, after a rehearsal, they had dropped her here from a crowded jolly car and Meredith Morgan, typically, had ducked out with a glum goodnight.

Later that evening, over brandy at his flat, Tennyson had gotten Tony Bastable, the director, to open up about Meredith. Tony was an

accountant in real life, a theatrical man only in his spare time. He was one of a type who abound in England, actors with enough talent to be only a shade or two below the Oliviers and Richardsons but who can not make it in a professional system that is grossly overcrowded. So they teach school or balance books and, making it look very easy, put on in church halls productions of a quality to stun visitors from across the Atlantic.

That night he had sat with his thin legs crossed at the ankles, his pink face wreathed in a beatific smile, sipping his brandy and talking of wartime years in India where he and a group of Air Force friends performed Shakespeare for a rajah. Then, prompted by Tennyson, he talked about Meredith Morgan.

She had been a rich girl once. She actually attended Roedean, which explained the plummy accent when she deigned to speak. Then, when she was around eighteen years old, her father managed to pull the set down around her ears.

What Mr. Morgan did was to embezzle money from his stockbroking firm in the City. The reason he stole was to meet gambling debts incurred in a casino in Grosvenor Square. One thing they frown upon in the City of London is embezzling. Not done. So Meredith's father locked himself in an air-tight room wherein he opened the gas valves without igniting a flame. Worse, he persuaded Meredith's mother to join him in this one-way ramble to eternity.

It was then that their daughter's nickname of "Merry" became permanently inappropriate. She stopped attending the prestigious private school, stopped smiling, stopped going out of the house, even stopped eating for quite a while.

It was tough going for a couple of years and, in the end, all Meredith Morgan could afford to offer the world was the cold, quiet robot so thoughtfully tolerated by the Hartfield Dramatic Society.

"Why does she go on with the acting then?" Tennyson asked.

"I suppose because she was a member before the fall," Tony said. "And today, it's her one avenue to the world."

Now, standing on the Broadway outside her door with the big red busses grumbling by and people queuing at the fruit stall in the lane, Tennyson wondered whether to ring Meredith's bell. Go ahead, he told himself. She's at work, she won't answer.

He stepped into the entrance and pressed the button. There was a click from above and the door fell ajar. Tennyson shrugged away a chilly, instinctive warning and went inside. A crumbling flight of steps led upward into a thick smell of animals and soup and rising damp. He trudged upwards, hearing a door creak open above him.

Meredith met him on the landing dressed in threadbare slacks and a sweater coated with cat hairs. A pair of ripe quilted slippers bloomed on her bare feet. "Oh, hello. Have I missed a rehearsal?"

"No. I was just walking by. There's something I have to ask you about—to settle my mind."

She drew the door almost shut behind her and stood small, the way she did onstage, with those thin arms hanging lifeless behind her back. She was not going to ask him in.

"Can we go inside?" Tennyson asked. "Just for a minute, I can't stay."

She led him in then. Tennyson was not able to look but he received an impression of twisted bedclothes, newspapers and magazines on the floor, used cotton swabs on a dresser, a mottled grey washbasin, and a pot full of something brown on top of a cooker. From the midst of all this, a heavy-eyed cat watched him with contempt.

Meredith said distantly, "I'm not well today. I couldn't go to work."

Not knowing where to begin, Tennyson said, "Where do you work?"

"The Education Authority, typing and filing. It's worth it being a civil servant; they can't sack you." Her tone of voice, the surroundings, cried out with self-pity.

Now, beyond her in a corner beside the bed, Tennyson saw the suitcase. Its shape and color, even the type of handle, identified it positively as the one he had seen in the Brighton vestibule. This made up his mind.

"Ach zo," he said thickly, "did ve haf a gut time by der zee?"

He saw no change in her but he felt a new current in the room, a slightly higher vibration. "Sorry, I didn't catch that."

"Meredith," he said, "I saw you check into that rooming house in Brighton. I heard you using a German accent, quite a good one. And I saw you pick up that man in the pub."

"What has any of that got to do with you?" It was her first speech with any fiber in it.

"Just that I saw his picture in the paper today. Somebody murdered



him, Meredith. And since I knew about it, and you haven't denied you were with him, I'm going to have to decide what to do with what I know."

She walked past him into the kitchen area and Tennyson had a terrible feeling she was going to offer him a cup of something. Even the thought of the utensils in this place . . . But she turned and said, "You'll go to the police."

"I don't want to. I don't want to make trouble for you. But that was very suspicious behavior."

"I know." She backed against the counter and turned her face in profile, and he wondered how this sad wraith had converted herself into yesterday's provocative tourist. "You know how shy I am. I can't help it. The only way I can let go is to become somebody else. That's what you saw in Brighton."

"But the murdered man. I'm right, he was your companion, wasn't he?" Her silence was enough. "So what happened? You did kill him, didn't you? I can tell."

Meredith's face crumpled and she wept like a child. Bits of explanation came through. "It was never like that before. He was cruel. He didn't want to make love, he wanted to hurt me. I had no choice. I had to defend myself."

"But he was stabbed. Do you carry a knife?"

"It was his knife. He was forcing me, on the beach by that terrible sewer. I pretended to cooperate and when he wasn't alert I grabbed the knife."

It could have been true and it could just as well not have been. But for a moment or two, Tennyson was touched by something in the girl's fierce loneliness. He remembered Tony Bastable's outline of her tragic background and saw her now as the bereaved teenager whose parents had taken the easy way out. He was not about to add to her misery.

"All right," he said, "all right, don't cry. I'm not going to the police." He found himself putting an arm around her shoulder and felt her stiffen and move away. "It's all over and done with anyway. We can't bring him back."

So Eric Tennyson took his secret away with him and carried it through an exciting summer, during which rehearsals for his play got under way. But his imagination would not let go of the material, and

he found himself working it into an outline for a drama that the society might want to stage at a later date. In this play, a shy girl from an amateur theatrical group makes regular trips to seaside resorts, assumes another character, picks up interested men, and then stabs them to death.

It was during the final week of rehearsals for his romantic comedy that Tennyson stumbled on an example of life imitating art that shook him to the ground. He was sitting alone in the dressing room backstage at Marlborough Hall, waiting for a lighting adjustment to be made. Bored, he picked up a copy of an old newspaper left there months ago by a member of some other company using the hall. The headline on page two caught his eye.

#### BRIGHTON STABBING FITS PATTERN

He read on and learned that the police had linked the murder of the Leeds businessman with two others committed within the year at other resorts along the coast—Bournemouth and Ramsgate. They were working on the theory that someone connected with yachting or coastal fishing was involved.

Tennyson tore the page from the musty tabloid, folded it small, and tucked it into a pocket. He was dizzy with apprehension and guilt. He should have gone to the police right away. How would he justify himself if he called them now, months after the fact? Still, she had not been active again—if, in fact, the other cases had to do with her at all. She had admitted the first killing, in self-defense, she said. The police might be wrong in linking all three.

Tennyson was looking glumly at the floor when Tony Bastable put his ruby face through the doorway. "Come along, author. You're wanted onstage." Eric had given himself a small part in his own play, to share the praise or the blame, whichever it might be.

He followed the director up the narrow steps and was able to lose himself in the make-believe action, to put off the troublesome responsibility, at least until he could talk to Meredith Morgan again.

But she was elusive during play week, vanishing after each performance, so he decided to show her the clipping at the cast party on the Saturday following closing night. It was a triumphant week for Tennyson because the audiences loved the play. A woman with West End

connections asked him for a copy of the script and said she was sending it to a chap who was always looking for comedies. Tony Bastable was ebullient and asked Tennyson what else he could give them. Eric said he had something on the fire, a thriller, and promised to show Tony the outline.

By party night, the euphoria had faded enough for Tennyson to be concerned again about the secret he was carrying. He waited for Meredith to show and when midnight arrived without her, he asked around. One of the cattier girls rolled her eyes at a friend and said, "She must have gone off on one of her trips."

"Trips?"

"Yes, didn't you know? Meredith is a loner. She saves her money and then sneaks off someplace where she can get drunk and let her hair down."

Tennyson did know. And his knowledge went further than theirs. If Meredith Morgan was about to do her thing again, he, Eric Tennyson, would be morally if not legally guilty of aiding and abetting.

He left the party and walked to Meredith's rooming house. The idea of calling the police still did not appeal to him. He was terribly late with his information and the story would be hard to follow. His best bet would be to follow the girl and head her off.

His fears were realized when she did not answer repeated rings of the bell and heavy pounding on the door. But a tiny bird of a woman did appear from another doorway on the ground floor. She was in a wheelchair and held a large cat on her lap. Tennyson knew that contemptuous look—it was Meredith's cat.

"Good evening," he said, putting on his brightest and best transatlantic voice. "I'm sorry to trouble you. I know Meredith Morgan has gone away, but she has a few pages of script in her flat and we need them for a reading. I wonder if I could just dart up and fetch them?"

"You're the lad who wrote the play."

"Yes, I am."

"I didn't go. I can't go anywhere. Congratulations, I heard it was smashing."

"Well, thank you." It was a chance, so Tennyson said, "Did Meredith say where she was going this time?"

"Never. That girl comes and goes as she pleases."

"Yes. Well then, if I might have a key . . ."

The landlady creaked away backwards on her giant wheels. A minute later, Tennyson was on his way up the stairs. It was a blind chance; he would have to be lucky. There were no travel folders on view in the dismal room so he busied himself nosing about the telephone table. Here he saw a directory with a lot of numbers scribbled on the cover. One looked fresher than the others, and its four-digit prefix indicated it was outside London. Taking a chance, Tennyson picked up the phone and dialed the number.

After a few rings, a cheerful female voice answered and said, "Good evening, The Cliffs Hotel."

"I'm sorry to trouble you. I have a silly question. Could you tell me where you're located?"

The girl laughed. "Last time I looked, we were in Penzance."

The first train he could catch was out of Paddington Station at 9:30 in the morning. Tennyson settled himself for the six-hour trip west, down through Devon and into Cornwall. He knew he was being shown some of the most beautiful countryside in the world but his mind would not let him enjoy it. He had to find Meredith Morgan fast. And then he had to decide what to do with her.

Penzance, the end of the line, came up a little after half past three. A stretch of sea on the left dazzled Tennyson—it was an indescribable blue and there was so much water he felt dizzy and had to grasp the rough train seat. There was no end to it—the sea was freedom, the sea pulled you away from the land.

The Cliffs Hotel was only a five-minute walk from the station. Tennyson went and stood outside, not knowing what to do. Meredith would not be registered under her own name. Would she be pretending again to be German? Perhaps, but not necessarily. Even so, how could he inquire without a name?

He began to feel the pressure of time. She would probably not be in her room on a sunny Sunday afternoon. But supposing she followed her Brighton pattern and chose a pub—Penzance had pubs on every corner.

Tennyson turned from the hotel and started walking. After all, Meredith was a visitor too. She could only have drifted down this hill and onto the main street, working up the other hill past the station. And he was in luck with English pub hours; they were all closed till six

so she had to be circulating.

It was almost six o'clock when he saw her. She was standing with a man outside a pub called The Turk's Head, the red plastic bag hanging over her shoulder, her hip cocked in a coquettish pose. The man was portly, his face florid in a frame of curly grey hair.

As Tennyson watched, the pub door was opened from the inside and the couple went through, ducking their heads under the low lintel. Not wanting to waste a second, Tennyson hurried across the street and stepped down into the entry. There were two doors, the Saloon Bar and The Snug. He tried the latter and found Meredith sitting alone on an upholstered bench. Her eyes widened.

"Where's your friend?" he said.

"In the loo."

"Good." He produced the newspaper story and showed it to her. She only glanced at it. "You admitted the Brighton killing and here are the police saying it's one of a set. How do you explain that?"

The portly man was back. Meredith spoke first, her German accent sounding impeccable. "I am so sorry, I lied to you. I am not alone. This is my husband, he has found me, and I am a bad girl."

Portly gave a gallant bow. "You could never be a bad girl, my dear. Sir, you are a lucky man." He insisted on buying them drinks and departed, wishing them years of happiness, hinting they needed babies to turn their marriage to gold like his.

Alone now, Meredith lowered her voice and dropped the accent. She admitted the crimes and said, through tears, that she could not help herself. Leaning close to Tennyson, taking his arm, she was everything the Meredith back in Wimbledon was not. He found himself feeling very sorry for her while an inner voice told him they were in this together—which, after his months of silence, was true enough.

"Look," he said during a second round of drinks, "we don't have to be Freudians to see the problems you've had to cope with. I heard about your parents' suicide and how that turned your life around."

"My life was miserable before that. They never loved me. They only loved each other. Oh, they gave me clothes and money and private schools. But that was to shut me up and keep me out of their sight." Her voice was flat.

Tapping the message out with a fingertip on the back of her hand, Tennyson said, "It can still be all right. You've got your whole life

ahead of you. I know you're broke now but we can get you into some sort of psychotherapy on the National Health. Or I can pay for a specialist—I've got money. No, listen to me. You can talk out this hostility and not have to go after older men."

"But after what I've done . . ."

"I've never believed in punishment for its own sake. Those men can't be brought back to life. The thing is to salvage *your* life."

He spent the night with her in her room at The Cliffs. A wind blew up and brought rain to lash the bay window, and beyond that sound breakers pulsed and crashed against the shingle beach. In an impulse, he asked her to speak to him in her German accent. She did, crooning romantic syllables in a husky voice, and he was overcome with desire for this strange, dangerous woman.

In the morning, the sky was blue again, the sea choppy under a brisk wind. Their best train to London was at four o'clock so they were left with hours to kill.

Meredith said, "Let's take a bus to Land's End. As long as we're here, it's a shame not to see it."

So they boarded a green coach and drove along winding country roads, the drystone walls ablaze with gorse in golden bloom. At Land's End, the wind was fierce and the mass of tourists headed for the safety of the hotel with its bars and lounges.

"Can we survive this hurricane?" Tennyson said, holding Meredith by both arms, finding it difficult to catch his breath.

"Don't be a coward," she said.

They walked round the hotel and crossed a dry decline to where an outcropping of eroded rock marked the southwestern tip of England. A white signpost indicated mileages to places like John O'Groats. The wind was incredible—Tennyson had never experienced anything like it. It was more than a movement of air; it had substance, as if they were standing in the rush of an avalanche.

"A little of this goes a long way!" he shouted.

Meredith was looking around. "We're the only brave ones," she said. "I love it." She moved from his side and ventured across a sloping rock, sitting down on it, bracing her feet, then peering over at the sea. She looked back over her shoulder and he was struck by her childlike beauty. With her hair streaming flat across her cheek, she looked



twelve years old.

"Come and see the color of the water!" she shouted. "It's unbelievable!"

He crept over the rock and edged to a position beside her. She was right, the water below was churned to an electric foam, boiling and reaching upward with sheets of spray.

Then her foot was kicking at his and her hand was in the small of his back and he felt himself sliding forward over the edge. In that last moment, he saw her eyes and noted that they were intent, filled with a fierce determination. And he thought of his success, of all the plays he was going to write, and there ought to be something he could do but he was head down now and screaming as he fell.

Tony Bastable was astonished and saddened by the tragedy at Land's End. Imagine old Eric being involved with Meredith like that. The American had never said anything; he didn't even seem to like the girl particularly. A faint whisper of suspicion sounded in Bastable's mind but he could not link it with anything.

As for Meredith, she had been a sad enough figure up till now. How could they possibly cope with her after this?

However, life must go on. More particularly, the life of the Hartfield Dramatic Society. Pity they had found a local playwright only to lose him after one success. Still, Tennyson had offered them his new play, so Bastable felt no qualms in rescuing it from his flat. If the outline had merit, another writer could develop it and they would have a nice newsy production, a posthumous premiere!

He settled into his armchair, stretched his legs, and began to read. Then Tony Bastable's intelligent eyes began to widen perceptively as he learned about the unloved actress who traveled to seaside resorts and killed strangers, and who was found out by a writer who pursued her, which left her with no choice but to kill him.

**The July issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* will be on sale June 15.**

Warren wanted to meet life head-on. . .

# EVERY MAN SHOULD HAVE A DREAM

by  
**TONITA S.  
GARDNER**



That's his picture in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Dressed in baggy pants and a scenic T-shirt that shows the sun setting below his protruding abdomen, he's christening his boat with a beribboned bottle of apple cider. And next to him, smiling as if she'd just had all her teeth capped, is his Brave Young Wife.

Only now I'm called his Brave Young Widow.

Yes, my husband is dead and in a way I'm to blame. But no one

comes right out and says so. Instead, they mention the proud look on my face, describe me as a woman who encouraged her husband even though his adventure was likely to be his undoing.

Which is just what happened. Warren Stokes—37-year-old Certified Public Accountant, bird watcher, and novice sailor—lost at sea.

Warren would be the last to regret his fateful voyage. You see, Warren had a dream. Like many men approaching 40, he yearned to do something extraordinary—something to expand his horizons and touch the hearts and minds of others. Except that he had no idea what it was. But then he saw the tall ships of Op Sail on TV, and his dream found its focus. Still he hesitated, not sure it could be translated into action, not sure I'd approve. But the dream persisted, was nurtured when that young toy designer scaled the World Trade Center in New York, when a boy in Coney Island set a world's record for consecutive roller coaster rides, and when a housewife in our neighborhood won a three-day spaghetti-eating contest and gained two inches around her hips plus a year's supply of marinara sauce.

If they could do it, so could he. And since there was plenty of time before his busy tax season, he'd sprung his news.

"Baby Doll—" he called me that because he was a head taller than my five-foot-two—"I've been a man of inaction for as long as I can remember. But now it's time for me to meet life head-on. If you say it's O.K., I'm going to sail across the Pacific."

"You're going to *what*?"

"Sail from here to New Zealand. All by myself."

"Warren—" I squeezed his hand to show that I appreciated the joke—"and I'm going to grow wings and fly."

"You don't *have* to grow wings," he told me. "You're already an angel, Sally."

Those were his exact words. And if such adulation sounds hard to believe, imagine the effect on me. Especially since I was never as good as he supposed. But Warren had little basis for comparison. Up to age 35, he'd never been romantically involved. Instead, he'd concentrated on building up his practice, assuming that once it was established he would find The Right Girl.

"I've been waiting all my life for you," he informed me after we'd been introduced by a friend of mine who wasn't impressed enough to date him herself. "And now that we've met, I intend to marry you."

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Was he for real? I thought, contemplating his bristly crew cut and mismatched clothes. Nobody talked that way any more.

But Warren insisted on treating me like a heroine in an old-fashioned novel, and after some of the men I'd been in love with I found it an entirely new experience. If we were going out to dinner Warren always asked where *I* wanted to go. If we were listening to records he played *my* favorites. And if it was a holiday—anything from Lincoln's Birthday to Labor Day—he'd buy *me* a present: an antique watch that invariably stopped at 12 o'clock, some lacy underwear whose seams gave me a rash, a set of golf clubs with twisted handles. His taste was never the greatest, but most of the stuff could be returned. The important thing was not to hurt Warren's feelings. He was the most giving person I'd ever known. Which is why, selfishly I must admit, I was attracted to him in the first place, and why, soon after, I exchanged my free-wheeling playgirl independence for a wedding ring.

When I remember how good he was, a little voice tells me, "Sally, you didn't deserve a man like Warren." The little voice is correct. And that's why I'll never forget him—even though we were only married a few years.

"It's not the amount of time people spend together," our minister, who'd recently been divorced, consoled me after Warren's funeral. "It's the quality of that time. And you and Warren had something special. I know because he told me so himself. My dear, not every wife offers her husband the kind of encouragement that lets a man strive to be more than he is—to try and realize a dream."

Dr. Perkins was right. I encouraged Warren. Even knowing I might lose him by doing so, I backed him all the way. Strange, isn't it? If he hadn't been so good to me I might have told him that his idea was crazy—and he would still be alive. But being who I am and having been married to someone like Warren, what choice did I have? When he announced that he wanted to sail the Pacific, I did the only feasible thing—I smiled and said, "Warren, if that's what you really want, I think you should go ahead."

He grabbed me around the waist and lifted me off my feet, careful not to drop me as he had when he carried me over the threshold on our wedding night. "Baby Doll, I knew you'd understand! And with my angel waiting for me, no matter how lonely I get out there, I know I'll make it!"

Such a trip had been attempted many times—but never by a man as inexperienced as Warren. (His only previous contact with boats had been at an adult-education course in sailing given by a former airline pilot.) But Warren's lack of experience didn't stop him from making a terrific deal on a 26-foot sloop, reputed to have been owned by an eccentric old lady who'd used it only on alternate Sundays.

Warren kept practicing until he was able to maneuver the boat, named (what else?) the *Baby Doll*—raising and lowering the sails, taking the craft out in all kinds of weather, making trial runs up and down the coast. The only thing that seemed to give him trouble was the ropes. Once he'd made a knot he had a terrible time getting it untied. But he was persistent. And while he was learning new skills, with typical CPA thoroughness, he began to outfit the boat—stowing provisions for a four-month voyage; acquiring maps, navigational instruments, and extra sails; buying the strongest rope, the sharpest knife, the brightest flares, and (though he had an excellent stomach) the most potent seasick pills.

To make it easier for me during his absence, he prepaid any bills that would be coming due—taxes, health and life insurance, rent—even adding some charitable contributions to the ASPCA. And he managed everything despite a torrent of publicity.

It started when one of his clients—a dentist who specialized in root canals—returned from a cruise to Acapulco and tried to write it off as a business expense. Cautioning him not to, Warren mentioned his own upcoming trip, whereupon the dentist, who belonged to The Book-of-the-Month Club, advised Warren that he'd have fantastic material for a saga-of-the-sea. "And I can help you get it published," he said. Hinting that from then on he'd expect his taxes done without charge, he announced that he knew a brain surgeon whose son-in-law was an editor at an aggressive paperback house. And before Warren could think it over, Dr. Root Canal was phoning his friend, who notified his son-in-law, who called Warren to set up an appointment—which concluded with the editor flourishing a contract and a ball-point pen.

Warren became an author.

He began by writing about his pre-sailing arrangements, prior to keeping a log of the actual expedition. If he was successful, the book would be published and would probably earn a great deal of money for him and even more for his publisher. But money was not Warren's mo-

tive. "I can always make an excellent living as an accountant," he maintained. To prove his intentions, he specified that his royalties were to be donated to the Foundation for Homeless Birds. "It's only right," he informed the editor. "I now have a perfect opportunity to realize my dream. That's all the reward I want."

This information was leaked to the news media. Warren's publisher, I suspect, sensed a big human-interest story and decided to make the most of it. The sudden notoriety was nerve-wracking—phone calls at all hours, letters begging for money, strangers camping on our doorstep.

And that wasn't all. Things got so bad that the boatyard had to be cordoned off so the *Baby Doll* wouldn't be pulled apart by souvenir hunters. Not to mention that dozens of men in their 30s, even less experienced than Warren, attempted to cash in on his publicity by getting a head start. One, fortifying himself with a fifth of Scotch, rammed his yawl into the Sausalito ferry while another, who didn't own a boat, was apprehended trying to steal one in the middle of the night.

But it was Warren, the man with the dream, who stirred the public's imagination. So much so that even before he was ready to embark, he was becoming a legend.

"A truly gentle man—one who learned to sail only recently—is about to undertake a voyage that would frighten men who have been at sea for years," opined one editorial before concluding, "Our hats are off to this very brave individual!"

As the time grew closer for his leavetaking, Warren had mixed emotions. "I want to go so badly I can taste the salt spray in my face," he said over and over. "But I'm going to miss you, Baby Doll. Terribly."

"You don't have to go, Warren," I told him in my weaker moments. "Anyone can change his mind."

"And I will," he said, "if my going puts a burden on *you*."

So it was up to me. And knowing I had a right to dissuade him even at this late stage (and knowing that he might not survive the trip), I did the very thing for which I am now being lauded: I encouraged him in his—should I say it?—bittersweet folly.

To quote one of the reporters who interviewed me, "In hindsight, Mrs. Stokes, if you had it to do over again—would you let your husband go?"

This was the question I'd been dreading. For I knew my answer would sound brutal to some, shocking to others. With my voice



aquiver I replied, "God forgive me for feeling this way—but, yes—I would let my husband go. It meant so much to him."

"So you don't think the trip was entirely in vain?"

I took out my handkerchief and dabbed at my eyes. "There's one lesson I learned from Warren—if we have nothing to look forward to, then life becomes meaningless."

"It does indeed, Mrs. Stokes. And that's a beautiful thought. Thank you for sharing it with our listeners."

"Thank *you*," I told him, because at that moment I was struck by a splendid idea—Warren's dream would become my dream. Yes, I too would sail across the Pacific.

And that's when the photographer snapped my picture—the one which appeared on all wire services and the 11 o'clock TV news. The announcer, describing my expression as beatific, declared, "Sally Stokes is an unusual woman." But all I felt was a deep dedication to what was now my very own project.

But to get back to Warren.

Not everyone was in favor of his imminent departure.

"WARREN STOKES—DON'T DO IT" warned a banner headline, adding sourly in the text, "This foolhardy venture can only lead to disaster."

The wording was prophetic.

Exactly two months out to sea (he'd just passed Bora Bora), Warren ran into a freak storm and, to keep from being washed overboard, lashed himself to the mast so thoroughly that he was unable to free himself after the storm abated and had starved to death as he gazed helplessly toward his goal. The boat was found floating by a Liberian trawler and was towed to Tahiti.

And that was the end of the dream.

But even though I lost Warren forever and must live with the knowledge that I'm partly responsible for what happened, I find that I'm at peace with myself. That's why, when the reporter asked if I would do it over again if I had the chance, I replied with that unequivocal yes. And now that I'm about to set sail on what I hope will be my own memorable voyage—a 90-day cruise on the QE2—I feel exactly the same.

Indeed, Warren had a dream. But he also had two left thumbs and three hundred thousand in insurance. And with that combination, when a man has a dream his wife is entitled to encourage him.

EVERY MAN SHOULD HAVE A DREAM

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Was Mrs. Justin really visiting relatives? . . .

# THE MIDNIGHT GARDENER

by VINCENT McCONNOR



“And I think that Justin man’s done away with his wife.”

“What did you say?” Steve finally looked up at her.

“He’s murdered her!”

“Why do you think that, Mrs. Coleman?” he asked, continuing to pull the weeds from between his lettuce plants. Why couldn’t people leave him alone when he was working in his garden plot?

“Well! When did you see Hazel Justin last?”

"Mrs. Justin? I don't remember. People come and go as they please here. Nobody keeps track."

"It's my opinion Hazel's gone for good! It's been more than a month since she was in the gardens."

"That long? I hadn't realized."

"She always used to show up every weekend with her husband. It's at least a month since I realized I hadn't seen her in several weeks. Such a frail little thing! She's gone but not very far. He's buried her there in his plot. You can see where he dug up the earth between those rows of corn."

"Now, Mrs. Coleman . . ." Steve dropped a fistful of weeds into the big cardboard box, already half filled, as he straightened and looked down at the wrinkled monkey face under the wide-brimmed straw hat. "You can't accuse Will Justin of a thing like that." He glanced across the individual garden plots and saw Justin, squatting down, digging with a trowel. "You shouldn't make such assertions without some kind of proof."

"Who needs proof! Everybody's talking about how Hazel's disappeared, how she and her husband used to argue all the time over which vegetables to plant and where. It seems she's from the South and he's a New Englander."

"I believe Will's from Maine."

"Oh? I thought he said Vermont. Anyway, Hazel wanted him to plant flowers between their rows of vegetables. Mr. Weber says they quarreled all the time—he's got a plot next to the Justins."

"O.K. So why doesn't somebody just go to Will Justin and casually ask him about his wife? See what he says."

"We have! In fact, I asked him again this morning."

"What did he tell you?"

"Same thing he tells everybody—Hazel's gone to visit her family in Virginia. He claims he had a letter from her last week. Only he never says where in Virginia or when she'll be coming back."

"He could be telling the truth, you know."

"I don't believe it!"

Steve studied her deeply tanned face and her white hair and inquisitive blue eyes. Somebody said she used to be a buyer for one of the big stores on Wilshire Boulevard. She was neatly dressed, as always, to work in her small plot of earth, wearing a fancy apron with pockets for

tools over a beige jumpsuit, and she carried heavy gloves to protect her hands. "Why have you come to me with this, Mrs. Coleman?"

"Because you're one of the five supervisors in charge. And you're the only one who really listens."

"Now, Mrs. Coleman . . ."

"I mean it, Steve! The other four are too busy with their own gardens but you always take the time to hear what any of us have to say. I suppose that's because you're an actor and, I'm told, actors are trained to listen. Also because you play the part of a cop in that television series and I thought you might have some idea about what to do about Hazel Justin."

"O.K., Mrs. Coleman. I've listened to what you had to say and I think you'd better forget what you've told me. You could start a nasty rumor."

"Start one? Rumors have been flying around here for weeks! And that jingle or whatever it is on the bulletin board is certain to start some new ones."

"What jingle?"

"You'd better have a look at it for yourself, and I'll get back to thinning out my string beans. Let me know if you learn anything about Hazel Justin."

"Yes, Ma'am. I'll do that."

Nobody seemed to have noticed them talking. Everyone was too busy in his own small piece of rich California earth—bending down or kneeling—digging and weeding and watering.

Moving casually, Steve made his way down a side path toward the wider path that led to the heart of the gardens.

This was one of the many community gardens in Los Angeles that had flourished for several years now. It was located above Franklin Avenue, overlooking Hollywood, on land that once belonged to a famous movie director. After his death the old mansion had stood unoccupied until it was destroyed by fire—hippies had been living in the enormous rooms, cooking their meals in open fireplaces. The charred ruins remained untouched for years and the gardens turned into a jungle of weeds. Then the city had taken over the property and, after the remaining buildings were bulldozed and the land cleared, turned it over to a group of local citizens for a community garden project.

He saw the bulletin board hanging on the side of a wooden shed that

was used for storing city-owned garden equipment. Every member paid for a key to the entrance gates but only the five supervisors had a key to the shed.

As Steve came closer he noticed a small sheet of white paper, thumbtacked in the center of the cork board, surrounded by the usual scrawled notices—garage sales, lost pets, apartments for rent.

He bent to read the typed words.

There's a body  
In this garden,  
And there's someone  
Knows just where.  
There's somebody  
In this garden  
Knows which someone  
Put it there!

Stupid to put that up where everyone would see! He'd better take it down before Will Justin noticed it. He pulled the sheet of paper from the bulletin board, folded it, and slipped it into a hip pocket of his dungarees.

As he turned away from the shed he wondered if whoever wrote that jingle was watching him.

Maybe he should have a word with Will Justin.

Somebody had typed that jingle and thumbtacked it to the bulletin board this morning. He or she was probably still here. There were at least forty people at the moment working their individual plots.

"Steve?"

He looked around to face an attractive blonde in faded denims who, with her husband, owned a small French restaurant in Hollywood. "Yvonne, I didn't see you." He walked toward her.

"You weren't seeing anyone, mon ami. In fact, you were talking to yourself!"

He laughed. "It's a bad habit of mine."

"How's the television series going?"

"Our rating's improving."

"Paul and I can't watch it because we never leave the restaurant before midnight." She lowered her voice. "Steve, I've wanted to ask you.

Do you have any idea what's happened to Mrs. Justin? Her husband's here this morning, but I haven't seen Hazel in weeks. I'm worried about her."

"Justin told somebody she's visiting relatives in Virginia."

"Virginia? I thought she said she was from Georgia!" She shrugged.

"I wonder if her job will be waiting when she gets back."

"What job?"

"She told me when they first joined the gardens that she couldn't speak any French but she worked several days a week in a shop on Santa Monica Boulevard called the Boutique Sans Chic. It may not have any chic but it's much too expensive for me."

"I didn't know she had a job. As a matter of fact, I'm on my way to speak to her husband."

"I do hope nothing's happened to her."

"I'll be seeing you." Steve continued on his way, turning into the path that led to Will Justin's plot.

Old Mr. Weber, in the next plot, was working among his tomato plants.

Nice people used this community garden—people like Yvonne Miller and her husband, although Steve hadn't seen Victor since their first visit—he left the growing of vegetables to his wife.

Edmund Hartley was working beside his wife in their plot across the path. Ed was a quiet middle-aged English actor who specialized in playing monsters in horror films. He stooped among his lettuces, pipe in mouth, as his wife prepared their lunch from a picnic hamper.

Will Justin wasn't aware of Steve's approach. This gave Steve a chance to study him, crouched between rows of zucchini, turning over the dark earth with a trowel. He was a small man, thin but muscular. His straight brown hair, cut short, looked faded. He was dressed in an old sport shirt and Levis, his bare feet in worn sandals. He looked to be in his late thirties.

Justin, sensing someone watching him, looked around. "Hi, Steve." He smiled as he straightened, the trowel in his hand. "I've been loosening the dirt around the plants, then I'm going to put down a little compost and give them a good sprinkle."

"We need rain. Everything's too damn dry." Steve walked closer to the tall rows of young corn. "Your corn's coming along. You should get some good eating ears in June." He saw that the path between the



rows had been dug up recently. Was there enough room there to bury a body? "I see you've been digging between these rows."

"I sure have." Justin dropped the trowel and brushed the earth from his hands. "I've got to give that corn a good dousing this morning too."

"How's your wife, Will?" Steve turned to face him. "I haven't seen her in some time."

"Hazel's gone back home for a spell. She's visiting her folks in Georgia."

"I thought she was from Virginia."

"She is, but she's visiting a married sister in Georgia."

"You don't come to the gardens so much yourself, any more."

"Only weekends. I've got no time during the week. I manage that apartment building where we live. The tenants are always after me to fix something, or complaining about something."

"*You're* not from the South, are you?"

"Nope. Hazel's the only southerner in the family. I'm from Vermont. I still have family back there."

"Your tomato plants look good. Well, I'd better get back to my own garden. I came over to see Yvonne Miller and noticed you over here. When's the wife coming back?"

"Another week or two, I guess. She hasn't said in her letters."

"It'll be good to see her again. See you, Will."

"See you."

Steve headed back toward the path.

So Mrs. Coleman was right. Justin was now saying that he came from Vermont but earlier he had certainly said Maine. And his wife was from Virginia but visiting a sister in Georgia . . .

Why would Will Justin be trying to confuse people?

Was Hazel Justin in Georgia? Or was she buried here between those rows of young corn?

What should he do about it? What could he do?

The problem continued to puzzle him until late in the afternoon he decided that there were two things he had to do right away—pay a visit to the apartment building Will Justin managed, and stop by the shop where Hazel Justin worked.

He found the address for the apartment building in a master list of the members who belonged to the community gardens.

Walking to the tall entrance gates on Franklin, he glanced back and saw that Will Justin was hard at work in his garden.

Steve got the address for the Boutique Sans Chic from a phone book when he stopped on Sunset Boulevard for a cup of coffee and a hamburger before driving to the Justins' building.

He parked his red Volvo and walked across the street to the apartment house. It was an old stucco building with at least a dozen units. He checked the mailboxes in the main entry and saw JUSTIN on Number 5, which probably meant their apartment was on the ground floor. As he started to leave he noticed the word MANAGER on the first mailbox. He peered through the window on the entry door. There was a metal 1 on the first inside door and the word MANAGER on a wooden sign by the door.

So Will Justin had lied. He wasn't the manager here.

Steve stepped back outside and followed a cement walk edged with plants past the entrances to several apartments that circled the small courtyard. Two windows in each. When he reached Number 5 he moved close to a dusty window and saw a small living room cluttered with ugly furniture. There were newspapers scattered on a sofa and spilling onto the floor, along with empty beer cans on a coffee table. Under the window a row of potted plants sat on a low shelf, all of them dead.

Steve moved back from the window in disgust. It made him angry when anyone let plants die. Why would Justin have a plot in the community garden if he didn't like to grow things?

"Lookin' for somebody, Mister?"

Steve turned to see a white-haired man in work clothes crossing the courtyard with a stepladder. "Yeah. I was trying to collect some money from some people named Justin. But there's nobody in—"

"Good luck, fella! He's never in this time of day. And I ain't seen her in weeks."

"Could you tell me—do they have jobs?"

"Justin works nights. I wouldn't know where."

"And his wife?"

"Somebody said she's gone away. Visitin' her family back east."

"Did Justin ever manage this building?"

"Where'd you get that idea? I been manager here for seven years."

"Thanks a lot. And don't tell Justin I was looking for him."

"You want to catch him in you ought to come back some morning. He generally sleeps 'til noon, or later."

"I'll do that."

The air inside the Boutique Sans Chic was heavy with the scent of cheap perfumes.

The place was really like a second-hand shop, racks, shelves, and cupboards overflowing with bright-colored rags. He moved between display tables piled high with women's clothes, toward the voices in the rear—girls' voices, chatting and giggling.

"Can I help you?"

He swung around to see a girl emerge from between two racks of leather coats. She was wearing an outlandish costume and layers of junk jewelry but she had a neat figure and an attractive face. "Does Hazel Justin work here?"

"Hazel Justin?" She frowned. "I never heard of her."

"Oh."

"Is it important?"

"Sort of."

"Wait a minute." She turned toward the back of the shop and raised her voice. "Anybody back there know someone named Hazel Justin?"

The laughter was silenced.

"Who wants to know?" A woman's voice called back, deeper and older than the others.

"Somebody's asking for her."

"Hazel Justin used to work here." A fat woman with wild black hair who seemed to be dressed in flowing purple scarves emerged from the back room.

"When was that?" Steve asked her.

"Two years ago, back when I first opened the place. I fired her."

"Would you mind telling me why?"

"Because she was robbing me blind. Hazel was a thin little thing but I noticed she always got heavier just before quitting time." She squinted at his face. "You're an actor, aren't you? You play a cop on the TV series."

"That's right. I'm Steve Lanser."

"I watch the show all the time. Is Hazel Justin a friend of yours?"

"Sort of. I haven't seen her in some time and I thought—"

"Be careful with that one. Hazel Justin isn't her real name, you know."

"Isn't it?"

"She left her purse in the john one day, and I opened it, thinking it belonged to a customer. I found her Social Security card inside with the name Zepha something on it."

"Zepha?"

"Zepha Scott, that was it. Hazel said the purse belonged to her—that Zepha Scott was her legal name. She had a boy friend who picked her up after work. It seems to me she called him Will. He was a mean character. They were always arguing. One night I saw him shove her into his car. I'm sorry I can't help you find her, but I haven't seen her since the night I fired her—and, frankly, I don't ever want to see her again."

"Maybe you have helped me," Steve said. "Thanks." He started back toward the entrance, through the perfumed dust.

"So all you've got to go on is that some snoop women think the guy buried his wife's body in the community garden."

Steve hesitated. "Well, I—"

"And the guy's told different stories about where he and his wife came from. Lots of people do that in Hollywood."

"I know, Harry, but—"

"You've learned that the guy lied to you about managing the apartment house where he lives, and his wife worked in some junk shop where she was fired for stealing merchandise. You know it's the right dame because a guy named Will used to pick her up after work."

"It all adds up."

"To damned little." Detective Harry Kirk looked out of his office window on the second floor of the Hollywood Police Division at the twilight-blurred rows of stucco bungalows. "The only thing you've come up with that might be important is that this Justin dame's real name is Zepha Scott—or was before she married Justin." He turned to squint across his desk at Steve. "Zepha isn't a name you hear every day."

"What about this?" Steve took the folded sheet of paper from his pocket, opened it, and thrust it across the clutter on the desk. "I found it posted on the garden bulletin board this morning."

Kirk held it under his desk lamp and peered at the typed words. After a moment he grunted and handed the sheet of paper back. "So somebody thinks they know where a body's buried and who buried it. Did Justin notice this on the billboard?"

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"It wasn't there long enough. One of the women told me about it and I took it down right away."

"And put your fingerprints all over it!"

"I didn't think."

"What does Justin look like?"

"Kind of average. You'd never notice him. Tell me, Harry, what should I do?"

"Are you reporting this to me officially or asking for an opinion?"

"Advice, I guess."

"Just because I'm technical adviser on that television series you're doing doesn't mean I'm available to solve your personal problems."

"I'm sorry, Harry."

Kirk laughed. "It's O.K., Steve. My advice is to forget the whole thing."

"Forget it? But—"

"You've got no proof Justin's buried his wife's body there. Let those females gossip. That should bring the whole thing out in the open. The Justin guy will eventually get wind of what they're saying and probably have to dig up his plot to prove nobody's buried there."

"O.K." Steve thrust the folded sheet of paper back into his pocket and got to his feet. "I'll leave it alone."

"Just because you play cops and robbers on television doesn't mean you can go around solving real crimes. We've got real detectives to do that." Kirk narrowed his eyes as he studied the young actor's face. "You're not hoping to get yourself some nice publicity by solving a real murder, are you? Headlines for your series?"

"You can go to hell." Steve turned and, without looking back, left the office.

Steve felt deflated and weary when he reached his small hillside house off Laurel Canyon. He went to the kitchen, pulled a TV dinner from the freezer, and shoved it into the oven.

Pouring himself a drink, he carried it to his favorite chair; he stretched out, took a swallow of Scotch, and set the glass on the coffee table next to the phone.

He had told Molly he would call but he was in no mood for a Saturday night on the town.

Maybe he should tell Luke Leslie what had happened. Luke was garden-master, in charge of everything. He was a nice guy who managed a supermarket. He was an expert on organic gardening and knew more than anybody else at the garden about the growing of vegetables.

Steve picked up the phone and dialed.

The phone lifted at the other end. "Yeah?"

"Luke, it's Steve Lanser."

"Steve! I didn't see you today. I was up on the north hill with some problem gardens and only just got home. Have you got a problem?"

"It's about that Justin guy."

"Will Justin?"

"It seems his wife's been missing for more than a month."

"You mean he's misplaced her?"

"People are saying he murdered her."

"What?"

"Somebody there wrote a jingle." He brought out the sheet of paper and unfolded it. "I found it on the bulletin board this morning." He read the jingle, then told Luke what he had learned about Will Justin and his wife.

"So Justin may have done away with his wife and planted her in his corn patch." There was silence. "Look, Steve, we don't want trouble at the garden. I've been running the place for three years now with no major problems. If those nosy women accuse Will Justin to his face of burying his wife there, something will have to be done, of course, but meanwhile let's not stir up trouble."

"O.K., Luke. Whatever you say."

"Vegetables grow better when everything's nice and calm. Let's keep it that way."

"Yeah. Whatever you say. I'll be seeing you, Luke." Steve put the phone down and had a large swallow of Scotch.

He would get no more help from Luke Leslie than he'd gotten from Harry Kirk. Nobody wanted to get involved.

He picked up the phone and dialed again.

"Yes?"

"Molly! This is Steve."

"Honey, you're late."

"I just got home."

"Have you been working at the garden all day?"

"Just about."

"Well, get yourself showered and changed and come straight over. Rita and Nancy and George are here, and the others are on their way. We're having drinks, then going somewhere for dinner and—"

"Not tonight, Molly. I'm too tired to be sociable."

"But, honey, they're all your friends."

"Tonight I don't have a friend in the world but you. And you won't insist on my coming over if you're really my friend."

"Oh. O.K., I understand. Working at the studio all week, then digging in those gardens every weekend—maybe it's too much work. Can't you stay home tomorrow and get some rest?"

"I may do that."

"In that case, what about dinner tomorrow night—someplace quiet?"

"Maybe that fish joint at the beach?"

"Perfect!"

"I'll call you in the middle of the day, after I've had my coffee."

He hung up and sank back into his chair.

He wondered if Will Justin did see the note on the bulletin board. If he noticed it would he go back there tonight and dig up his wife's body, maybe try to move it somewhere else?

Maybe someone else was buried there.

Maybe Hazel Justin really did go to visit her family.

Why would Justin lie to him about managing that apartment building?

He had a job somewhere. The manager had said Justin worked nights and slept late every morning.

It was strange about his wife stealing from the shop where she worked. Why would she do that if her husband had a job? And why did she have another name on her Social Security card? Zepha Scott—an odd name, as Harry Kirk had said. Zepha . . .

Smoke.

Was something burning? Steve wakened abruptly and saw a thick

grey haze of smoke—his TV dinner! He sprang from the chair and ran to the kitchen.

He turned off the gas and opened the oven door. His dinner looked like lumps of black sludge. He picked up the aluminum tray with a potholder and carried it outside and set it on the ground, then went back inside and opened all the windows. As he did so he realized that he had reached a decision about what he must do. He had known even before he fell asleep that he would go back to the garden tonight.

Checking the electric clock on the bed table he saw that it was after ten. Moving more quickly, he showered and dressed.

He drove into Hollywood, parked his Volvo on a side street below Franklin, and walked to the main entrance.

He let himself in through the tall metal gates and snapped the padlock closed again.

He started up the wide entrance road that led to the crest of the first of several ridges of land. This lower section near the high metal fence edging the street was planted with avocado trees. They were supposed to be two hundred years old and were the tallest he had ever seen, their leaves so thick that the ground beneath was in deep shadow on the sunniest day.

Now, at night, it was impossible to see even the trunks of the trees. Anyone could hide under there.

He walked up the sloping road to the first and widest ridge of gardens. His own plot was on this level—and Will Justin's.

Old-fashioned gas street lamps were scattered through the gardens, set far apart. Their pale globes were barely visible but there was a faint spill of light from overhead. Steve looked up and saw that the sky was glittering with stars. He stood for a moment, listening, getting the feel of the place—it was the first time he had been there at night.

There were distant traffic noises from Hollywood Boulevard, but not a sound in the gardens. The silence made him uneasy.

Where should he wait for Will Justin? He would be much too conspicuous if he crouched in his own garden plot. There was an old crate he could turn over and sit on but he would still be much too visible. He decided to wait in the shed.

When he reached the shed, he paused and looked around. He could barely see his own plot to the left and Will Justin's plot on his right.



He took out his keys, fumbled to find the one for the shed, and unlocked the door. Stepping inside, he felt along the wall until he found the light switch, and snapped it on.

The unshaded bulb, hanging on a cord from the ceiling, revealed neat rows of garden tools, a wooden table piled with supplies, bags of fertilizer stacked in a corner, and one battered kitchen chair.

Steve picked up the chair and set it near the door, facing outside, and switched the light off again.

He left the door wide open and sat down, moving the chair slightly so that he could watch Will Justin's garden.

Nobody would be able to see him from outside.

He started to reach for a cigarette, then decided he shouldn't. He sighed, his stomach empty, and sat back to wait.

Had he come for nothing?

Would Will Justin show up and do something about what was buried between those rows of corn? Surely, with so many people asking about his wife, he would be afraid to leave her body here another night—especially if he had seen that jingle.

Steve repeated the words in his mind.

There's a body  
In this garden,  
And there's someone  
Knows just where.

His attention was caught by a faint sound from outside.  
Somebody walking?

He strained to hear more but the sound wasn't repeated. It must have come from the street, beyond the gate.

He relaxed, leaning back against the hard wooden chair.

An hour more of this and he'd be ready to leave.

He thought of the jingle again.

There's a body  
In this garden.

Who could have written it? Which of the community gardeners?

There were more than a hundred of them now. One of them knew there was a body in the garden. And who had put it here.

Was it possible Will Justin had come back earlier—right after dark—and dug up his wife's body?

The air in the shed had a strong smell of fertilizer. Steve began to feel sleepy but was roused by a scratching sound. A small animal moving inside the shed? A rat? He had seen rats in the gardens during the day. There must be all kinds of animals here. Many of his vegetables had been dug up and chewed. The animals would take over after dark, when everyone was gone.

Raccoons, squirrels, rabbits. Snakes!

There had been rattlesnakes when the gardens first opened but as far as Steve knew none had been reported in more than a year. All he needed was a rattlesnake gliding over his loafers.

He should have worn boots tonight. He'd better walk carefully when he left—keep to the main paths where he could see where he was going.

He shivered. The air in the shed seemed to be getting colder.

It must be after eleven.

He wondered if Justin worked on Saturday nights. If he did, would he get off from his job before midnight, then come to the gardens?

The jingle kept running through his head.

There's a body

In this garden,

And there's someone

Knows just where.

In Will Justin's plot. That was where.

There's somebody

In this garden . . .

Steve came awake with a start, nearly slipping off the chair. He bent forward, listening, but there was no sound. He got slowly to his feet, his right leg half asleep, and went to the open door, moving cautiously.

His eyes began to adjust to the darkness and the gardens seemed to float in a ghostly blur of light from the sky.

Hesitating outside the shed, he looked toward Will Justin's plot.

He was there!

Or *somebody* was there—a dark figure bending between the rows of corn.

There was a dull flash of metal.

Steve started across the garden plots, forgetting his intention to keep to the main path. His loafers sank into the soft earth that some gardener had watered earlier.

Will Justin's back was turned. Steve could see the mound of earth he had already dug up. He saw the motion of Justin's arms as he shoveled more dirt onto the pile. He could smell the rich scent of the freshly turned soil. Now he could see a dark shape on the ground between the rows of corn. He drew a sharp breath.

Justin turned and saw him. The shovel dropped from his hands and he stepped out from between the tall stalks of corn. "Steve!" he said. "What are you doing here at this hour?"

"I've been waiting for you, Will. I had a hunch you'd come back to-night after that note on the bulletin board."

"What are you talking about?"

"Didn't you see it? Somebody wrote a jingle saying there's a body buried here in the gardens, that they know who buried it."

"A body?"

"Some people think you buried your wife here, Will, between these rows of corn."

"My wife?" He laughed. "So that's why everybody's been asking where Hazel's gone! Trying to find out when she's coming back."

"Hazel?—her name's Zepha, isn't it?"

"How'd you know that?" He reached into his pocket and brought out a revolver. "It seems to me you know too much, Steve."

Steve stared at the gun and felt a lurch in his stomach.

"Funny thing—" Will said "—you thinking Zepha's buried here."

Steve realized that his height and muscle gave him no advantage over the smaller man, not without a gun in his hand.

"I'll be meeting Zepha next week. That's why I came here tonight. I've got to dig everything up and take it with me. They won't be seeing me around these gardens any more, Steve. They've served their purpose. Another hour and I'll be on my way to Arizona to meet Zepha. Only first I've got to do something about you."

"Drop that gun, Willie!" The order came over Steve's shoulder.

"Easy! Let it fall to the ground." Another voice came from behind Justin.

A beam of light shot past Steve and spotlighted Will Justin against the rows of corn. The gun fell from his hand and thudded on the earth.

Several men darted forward, surrounding Justin.

"You were right, Steve." Steve turned to find Harry Kirk at his side, police revolver in his hand.

"Something was buried here." The detective slipped the revolver into a holster under his jacket. "That name Zepha Scott rang a bell earlier this evening. I did a fast check on Hazel Justin and found she's being held downtown on a shoplifting charge. So I knew she had to be Zepha Scott. She'll be getting out next week. Probably meeting Willie somewhere."

"Arizona—he just told me."

"I know." Kirk turned to the other detectives. "What've you found?"

A young detective flashed a light on a large open valise. "All kinds of jewelry. Probably the big Beverly Hills job among others."

"Isn't there a body buried there?" Steve asked.

"I don't think so," the young detective answered. "But I think we'll find a lot more jewelry. We'll be digging here all night."

Steve walked with Kirk toward the main road. "So Will Justin didn't kill his wife."

"You mean Willie Scott. No, he's no killer. Second-story men seldom are unless they're cornered. Willie's been pulling burglaries in Los Angeles for nearly a year but we couldn't catch him. When his wife was picked up for shoplifting she used the name Hazel Justin. She had no previous record under that name so the judge gave her a short sentence. It was the name Zepha that tipped me off. Zepha Scott has a long record for shoplifting as well as being lookout for her husband on his jobs. So I knew your Will Justin had to be Willie Scott.

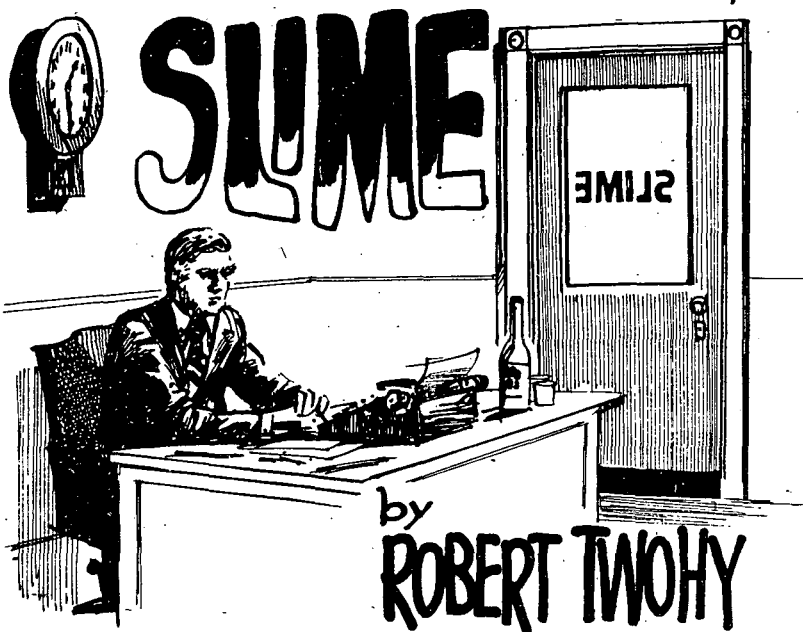
"I had a hunch you'd come back here tonight. We've been waiting for the two of you." He turned and squinted at the actor. "I suppose you'll be getting yourself some nice publicity out of this."

"Now that you mention it, I guess I'd better call my press agent."

"I was afraid of that."

"Don't worry, Harry," Steve said. "I'll give him your name. I'll see that you get second billing."

*From 9:00 to 5:00, Slime waited. . .*



It was about 1:00 in the afternoon. A man sat at a desk in an office. The office was four floors up in a drab building in a low-grade business neighborhood in San Francisco. The office had a frosted door and on it were the letters SLIME. That was all—just SLIME.

The man sat at a plain wooden office desk. On it were a telephone, a typewriter, and some papers—and a pen, some pencils and paper clips, a quart bottle of bourbon, and some paper cups. The

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man wasn't talking on the telephone or working the typewriter or playing with the paper clips or drinking bourbon—he was just sitting. He sat in an old office armchair and didn't move.

He wasn't a big man, but he wasn't a small man either. He wore a light grey suit with wide lapels and a white shirt with buttoned-down collar points. Between the collar points was the knot of a wide green tie with grey stripes. The knot didn't show any wrinkles. The man who sat there knew how to tie a tie.

His eyes were light blue. They were clear and steady and gave him the look of a man who could look a long time at something or someone and not blink much. His eyebrows looked uncombed but not unkempt. His brown hair had some touches of grey. On the side of his neck was a pink pustule; apart from that, his powerful skin showed no blemishes. Strong competent-looking hands rested on the desk and didn't play with the pustule.

He sat there and some time passed, enough so that the hands of the ancient wind-up clock on the pale green wall registered 1:30. The man moved a little in his chair during that time, but not much. His eyes blinked occasionally and he breathed regularly, but his face was without any expression. His eyes kept their clear steady look.

He had been sitting for the past twenty-two days in that chair—during office hours, 9:00 to 5:00—sitting, and waiting. He wasn't an impetuous man. He knew that, between jobs, waiting was the best thing he could do. If a man isn't in his office clients who come looking for him won't find him, because he isn't in his office. That was the way he reasoned, and why he waited in his office.

At 1:37 there were quick heavy footsteps in the hall and the man knew his time of waiting was over. The footsteps approached his frosted door. More than two feet were making the sound of the footsteps. His trained ear could separate the sound of two feet making footsteps from the sound of more feet. He classified the sound as that of six feet making footsteps—and he was right, as he saw when the door was thrown open and three men hurried in, the last one slamming the door behind him.

The first man in was big and wore a gabardine overcoat. He had a .45 in his hand. Concealing his face and most of his head was a pull-over rubber goose mask. The .45 pointed at the man in the chair, who

didn't look especially startled; it took more than a goose-headed man pointing a .45 at him to startle him. His hands still rested in a relaxed way on the desk.

The other men weren't small, but not as big as the man in the goose head. Over their heads they wore grocery bags with round eyeholes. They each pointed a .22 at the man in the chair.

"Go for a gun and we'll plug you," the goose-headed man said in a hoarse voice. "Won't we?" he said to the other two.

They muttered that they would.

"Are you Slime?"

The man in the chair, his blue eyes clear and steady, his lips without a tremor, nodded slightly.

"You're going to do a job for us."

The man who had agreed his name was Slime said in a soft low voice, "Who are you?"

"Names don't matter. We're the kidnappers of the Feekwood boy."

The Feekwood case had been front-page news the past four days. Phineas Feekwood was a renowned San Francisco tycoon, residing on Pacific Heights. His only son, Mortimer, called "Sonnyboy" and "Laddykins" by his adoring father, had disappeared the previous Friday on his way home from school. It was a school set up by the court system for habitual drunken drivers. Mortimer was 52 years old. Some years before he had been in the papers, accused by the parents of numerous local debutantes of trying to establish a white-slave empire, but the jury had decided that he was misunderstood and really only paying compliments to the girls.

Whatever Mortimer Feekwood's life style, Slime found no justification for abducting him. Yet these men, although their leader claimed that they were the kidnappers of Mortimer, might not be. Slime's next question was calculated to find out.

"How do I know that's true?"

The leader snapped his fingers. One of the men wearing a grocery bag reached in his pocket and drew out a handkerchief, which he extended to Slime.

Slime held out one of his strong square hands and accepted the flimsy bit of cloth. His eyes were unblinking as he studied it. It bore in one corner the embossed initials, M.F.

Slime set it on his desk. He said, "Put away the guns."

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The goose-headed man snarled, "Don't tell us what to do."

"Put away the guns."

"Stop ordering us around!"

Slime sat without movement. His face showed no expression at all.

One of the bagged men murmured, "He's a cool one."

Slime said in the same level voice, "I don't talk to clients who point guns at me."

"You don't have to talk," said the goose-headed man. "You just have to obey. You'll be paid for it. Take that handkerchief to Phineas Feekwood. He'll know we have his kid. Tell him we want two million dollars in old ten-dollar bills. Tell him to get the money together and give it to you. Tell him that you're not one of us, but that you're a licensed private eye and we're hiring you as go-between . . . Cops'll be at his place, probably. Tell the cops no one's to follow you or tap your phone, or anything like that. Convince them of that—otherwise you won't get paid your fee. You got it all so far?"

Slime said, "Put those guns away."

"Are you in business or aren't you?" It was an angry shout.

"I don't talk to clients who point guns at me."

The goose-headed man swore. The clear level eyes of Slime saw the shoulders of his henchmen square and their forefingers tighten on the triggers of their .22s.

He heard one of them whisper, "He's *top* cool!"

"I'm tired of his attitude," said the leader. "I make him a fair business proposition and all I get is insults. Let's finish him off."

"All right by me."

"I like the idea."

Slime saw the three knuckles on the triggers start to whiten.

"Why not join me in a final drink?" he said in his low voice.

The three assassins were silent a few moments.

"I don't think I've ever seen such a cool character."

"He's a new one on me."

The leader said, "I can't drink with this goose head on."

One of the others said, "I'm reformed. My life used to be a mess. Now I've got friends and a purpose in life. You should give up drinking."

"I'd drink a final drink with you," said the second henchman, "but I made a promise to my mother."



"Hurry up," said the leader. "Drink your drink. We can't stand around all afternoon gassing with you."

They watched as Slime took a paper cup and reached for the bottle of bourbon.

He picked up the bottle with a sudden strong yank. The three social misfits could see, for one startled instant, that a wire was attached to the base of it. The wire ran into a hole in the desk. The yank caused an instantaneous action of some gear within the desk and in the blink of an eye the front of the desk fell forward, exposing a nest in which reposed a belt-loaded machine gun on a swivel, obviously ready to fire.

Six amazed eyes were riveted on the menacing muzzle of the gun, and three pistols drooped in three unnerved hands.

Slime, still sitting, with one hand now out of sight behind the desk, said in his quiet way, "Drop the guns. I have in my hand a cord which, if I pull it, will fill you full of lead."

They threw their weapons on the floor.

Holding the cord that ran into the hole in the desk, Slime took the telephone off the hook and dialed the number of the San Francisco Police Department. To the voice that answered he said, "Give me Lieutenant Gilhooley."

The three visitors looked at the muzzle of the machine gun, and Slime looked back at them.

A voice came on. "Gilhooley here."

"Slime," said Slime.

"Slime! What do you know! How've you been, Slime?"

"I've been all right. I have the kidnappers of Mortimer Feekwood."

"What!"

Slime, with no change in inflection, repeated what he had said.

"We'll be right over!"

Slime hung up.

He watched the three miscreants as they continued to look at the muzzle of the gun.

Ten minutes later policemen trooped into the office: Lieutenant Gilhooley, a brick-faced man wearing a grey hat low on his head, entered first.

He looked at the goose-headed man and cried, "So it's The Fowl!"

"You know him?" asked Slime.

"I know him," Gilhooley said. "So you and your boys pulled the Feekwood snatch, eh, Fowl?"

"It's a frame," muttered The Fowl.

"We don't know nothing," said one of his assistants.

"I want my mother," said the other.

Slime held up the handkerchief with the letters M.F. on the corner.

"There's your evidence," said Slime. "Mortimer Feekwood's handkerchief."

"Talk," said Gilhooley.

The Fowl did so. He told where Mortimer Feekwood was being held captive in an abandoned tea shop in an unattractive part of town.

"Take them away," said the Lieutenant.

The Fowl snarled, "Blast you, Slime."

Slime looked back at him. His eyes were without anxiety.

Gilhooley picked up the handkerchief. "Thanks, Slime."

Slime gave him a slight nod. Then he said, "Pick up the front of the desk there, will you, and hang it back on the rods?"

Gilhooley did so. The desk was again as it had been.

The Lieutenant said, "I guess they didn't know you—or they wouldn't have come here. They must have come on your name in the yellow pages and it caught their attention."

Slime nodded again slightly. He knew that his name in the yellow pages often did that—caught attention.

The Lieutenant went out. The clock on the wall said 2:39. Slime sat there. He was still.

Time passed. The clock said 4:00. Slime had moved a few times, but not much. He was waiting. Thwarting The Fowl had earned him nothing. Phineas Feekwood might offer a reward but Slime didn't accept rewards. It was part of his code. He took only what he earned—his fee. Plus expenses. But he had had no expenses thwarting The Fowl. So he hadn't earned a dime.

So he waited. It got to be 5:00.

He got up, locked the office door, and went out.

Tomorrow was another day. A customer would come. If not tomorrow, the next day. Or the next. Somebody would be struck by his name in the yellow pages.

He would wait.

He was Slime.

There's no question but that it was among the worst of times . . .

# HOME IS THE HUNTER

by EDWARD  
D. HOCH



The first time she met him was at the correspondents' club in Saigon, in those final bloody weeks before the last Americans pulled out of Vietnam. The bar was crowded that night, as if everyone sensed their days together were numbered. She was drinking with Harry Fostex from UP, and when he waved the stranger over she made room for him to squeeze into the booth beside her.

"Jill, this is Mike Criter from *Paris-Match*," Harry said, performing

the introductions above a sudden outburst of singing from the bar. "Mike, this is Jill Jackman. She's doing a book."

He grinned at her and she noticed a gold tooth far back in his mouth. "Jill Jackman? Jack and Jill?"

She was used to it. "My parents had a sense of humor. But what about you? An American reporting on the war for *Paris-Match*?"

He shrugged. "I started with the *International Herald-Tribune*, and once I was in Paris writing for the magazine seemed like a better deal. I suppose they like an American viewpoint on the war, though I'm not at all sure that's what I'm giving them."

"How long do you think the south can hold out?"

"Not long now. We'll all be out of here in a matter of weeks. If we're lucky, that is."

Harry Fostex ordered another round of drinks. "We might as well make the most of our last few nights, then."

In the narrow confines of the booth Jill was acutely conscious of Mike Criter's thigh pressed against hers. "Tell me about the book you're doing," he said. "Is it a novel?"

She shook her head. "Everyone asks me that. I must look like a lady novelist."

"They should all look as good as you."

"The book is straight reportage," she said, ignoring the compliment. There were always lots of compliments in bars late at night. "But from my viewpoint. It's about the people I've met here while covering the war—the Vietnamese especially—and what it's done to them."

"That's a big order."

"Jill's the one to fill it," Harry interjected. "She's got a great head on her shoulders, in more ways than one."

That was almost all the conversation they had that night. As the singing grew louder, they gave up trying to talk. But events were moving faster than any of them could have imagined. Evacuation of all remaining Americans from the country was being openly talked of as Thieu resigned and the troops from the north pressed on toward Saigon. By April 28th they were within a mile of the city. By the following day, helicopter evacuations were under way and crowds were besieging the gates of the American embassy.

As the fighting reached the city limits and American helicopters landed on rooftops to load up long lines of waiting Americans and Viet-

nameless, Jill found herself driving a jeep through streets that seemed suddenly strange and unfriendly. That was when she met Mike Criter for the second time.

"This your jeep?" he asked, running up to her at an intersection.

"I guess so. It was Harry's, but he caught a helicopter out, after fighting through the traffic jam at the American embassy."

"About time you caught one too. But how about driving me to the airport first?"

"Tan Son Nhut? It fell, didn't it?"

"Not quite yet. It's under rocket attack. I have to check on a shipment there, make sure it got out all right."

"And you want *me* to drive out there?"

He shrugged. "Or else let me have your jeep."

"Get in. I'll drive you."

They passed the presidential palace, heading north up Le Van Duyet Street toward the airport. "You'd better get out of Saigon while you can," he advised. "The Vietcong will be in the city by tomorrow."

"What about you?"

He shrugged. "I take my chances."

"Do you have a family back in Paris?" She swerved to avoid a shallow bomb crater in the street.

"No family. I was married for a year right out of college but it didn't take. That was ten years ago."

The road to the airport was almost deserted, but the rocket attack seemed to have ceased for the present. They passed a burning truck and Jill swung the vehicle through the open gates leading to the terminal. There were no guards left to challenge them. "There's talk the CIA bungled the intelligence data," she said. "They didn't start the evacuation in time. A lot of people will be stranded." She could see some of them, crowded around the terminal.

"There's always talk that somebody bungled," he answered grimly. "It's a way of life today—finding a scapegoat, placing the blame."

"Where do you need to go?" she asked. They were almost to the terminal.

"That warehouse at the end of the access road. Turn around at the end and come back for me. I'll be out in two or three minutes."

"I hope there's a story in this for you."

She dropped him in front of the warehouse and kept on going,

swerving in a wide circle where the road ended. That was when she saw them, a half dozen black-clad Vietcong breaking from cover to envelop her jeep. She gave a cry as the first one reached her, tearing her hand from the wheel. How could she have been foolish enough to come out here?

"Press!" she shouted, trying to make herself understood as a carbine was pointed through the window at her head. "I'm not a soldier, I'm a reporter! Let me go!" She tried to reach her press card, but the patrol leader tugged at her wrist, indicating he wanted her out of the vehicle. He put his face close to hers and shouted some words she didn't understand. She looked at him, and at the carbine the other soldier held, and knew there was no escape. Oddly, in that moment as they dragged her from the jeep, she thought of her book and wondered if it would ever be finished now.

Then one of the men shouted a warning and she looked up to see Mike Criter jogging down the road toward them. The carbines swung up to cover him, but there was something so disarming about the smile and the wave he gave them that they were momentarily off guard.

"Mike!" she shouted. "Go back! You'll get us both killed!"

"We're press," he said, holding up his pass for them to see.

The man who held Jill seemed to understand, but he only shook his head and muttered, "Mericans."

Criter had reached them now, puffing a bit from his jog. He turned to the man with Jill and began, "Look here—" Then, without warning, his fist shot out and clipped the man on the jaw. He yanked on one of the carbines with his free hand, moving so fast Jill hardly had time to react. "Into the jeep!" he yelled. "And drive like hell!"

He was climbing in after her when the bullets caught him in the stomach. He stiffened and she saw the blood on his shirt. Then another shot shattered her windshield and almost as a reflex action she jammed down on the accelerator.

In the rearview mirror she saw Mike Criter's body roll over in the dust as one of the Vietcong soldiers fired his carbine into it. Another was taking aim at her, but she weaved down the road like a stunt driver, leaving a cloud of dust behind. She heard shots but felt nothing hit her.

By the time she reached the traffic of the nearby streets she was shaking uncontrollably. She pulled the jeep to a halt and sat sobbing

over the wheel. It had been a nightmare. This man she hardly knew had died saving her life! She wanted to scream to these people in the streets that the enemy was here—the Vietcong had entered the city!

But perhaps they knew it.

Perhaps that was why they were running.

A jeep full of tattered Vietcong entered the city on April 30th, and the North Vietnamese regulars were close behind. Jill caught one of the last helicopters out, taking off from the roof of the American embassy while rockets fell once more on the airport to the north. It was the end of the war for her.

She cabled the editor of *Paris-Match*, advising him of Mike Criter's death, but she never received a reply. A correspondent for *Time* magazine interviewed her on the deck of the carrier where the helicopter landed, but the story of her close escape and Mike's death was buried among all the other stories that day. It became a chapter in her book, *Flame on the Hillside*, of course, but when it finally appeared late in 1976, it was respectfully reviewed and quickly sank without a trace.

It was late the following year, at a New York cocktail party arranged for the launching of one of her literary agent's other clients, that she met Harry Fostex for the first time since Saigon. His hair was greyer, and he was a bit drunk, but he remembered her. "I'm sorry your book didn't do better, Jill. It deserved to."

"People don't want to be reminded of Vietnam, I guess."

"Probably not," he agreed.

"So what are you doing in New York, Harry? Are your traveling days over?"

"I wish they were. I spent the weekend before Thanksgiving in Jerusalem covering the Sadat-Begin talks."

"Are you still with UP?"

He nodded. "Just putting in my years until retirement."

"Do you ever see any of the Saigon crowd?"

"Oh, sure. That reminds me of something in your book—that chapter on Mike Criter being killed by the Vietcong. He's not dead. I saw him last week."

"Not dead!" At first she didn't understand the words, and then she thought he must be kidding. And then she suddenly went cold and she

thought she was going to faint. "But I saw him—"

"Oh, he took about a pound of lead, all right—says he was more dead than alive for weeks. But he pulled through. He was in a Vietnamese prison for a time, but they finally released him because of his health. A couple of the bullets messed up his lungs a bit."

"But there was nothing in the papers—"

"Mike never was one to look for publicity."

"Didn't *Paris-Match* print anything about their own correspondent?"

"Apparently not. He's no longer with them."

Her head was still in a whirl. This was the man she thought had died saving her life. "But why didn't he contact me when my book came out?"

Harry Fostex shrugged. "Maybe he hasn't read it, Jill."

"I must see him! Where is he living?"

"I don't know. I saw him at the Overseas Press Club. They might have an address for him if he's a member."

The following morning she phoned the club and obtained Mike Criter's address in the East Village. There was a phone number too, and she called it.

A young woman answered and informed Jill that Mike was out of town. "He doesn't really live here," she explained. "He uses this as a New York address."

"It's very important that I reach him," Jill said. "I thought he was killed in Vietnam. I only learned he was alive last night!"

"I don't know when he'll be in the city again."

"You must have an address for him. It's very important that I see him. I was with him when he was shot. I thought he was dead. I told everyone he was dead."

The woman seemed to hesitate, then she said, "I think he's gone deer hunting. I heard him making reservations at a place in Pennsylvania."

"Do you have the name?"

"Just a minute." She returned and read it off. "The Green Hill Inn. It's near New Hope, in Bucks County."

"Thank you very much."

"You're going there?"

"I think so," Jill said. "Yes."



She hung up and got out a road atlas. The area was only a few hours' drive from Manhattan. She got the number of the Green Hill Inn and called it, but the desk clerk told her that they had a Mike Criter registered but he was not in his room—was there any message?

"No," she said, "no message." She hung up and started dressing.

It took her just over two hours to drive the hundred miles across New Jersey into Bucks County. A gas-station attendant directed her to the Green Tree Inn, telling her it was a private hunting lodge that had been closed for some years until out-of-state people recently purchased it. She found the low rambling buildings of the lodge at the end of a long dirt road, nestled in the woods about ten miles beyond New Hope. There was a central building with smaller cabins scattered about it, half hidden by the trees. Two hunters were tying a dead deer to the roof of their car as Jill drove up, and she knew from their expressions that women weren't particularly welcome during hunting season.

The room clerk at the main lodge told her Mr. Criter was still out with his party. She sat down to wait, trying to decide what her first words to him should be.

But he entered through a door behind her, and he was the first to speak. "Hello, Jill. How've you been?" Calmly, as if he'd seen her just last week.

She jumped to her feet, her face flushed. "Mike! I couldn't believe it when I heard you were alive. I was sure you were dead."

He smiled. There were lines in his face that hadn't been there before, and he was thinner. But he was still Mike Criter. "I'm a hard one to kill," he said.

"Can we go somewhere and talk?"

"Sure. There's a little bar in here. It's not really open and there's no liquor, but I think I can find a couple of beers."

She followed him into the bar and took a seat. The red plastic was cool through the fabric of her pants suit, and the whole place had a damp mustiness about it. "Is this a private club?" she asked.

"More or less. I know the people who run it."

"Tell me about yourself. Tell me what happened."

He smiled. "There's not much to tell. I took two bullets in the lung and two more in the side. Luckily they missed the really vital spots. I was still pretty messed up, though, and if they hadn't given me special

care I wouldn't have made it. Anyway, they had me in prison for a time but then they released me when my lung started acting up."

"It kills me that I didn't know. All this time I thought you were dead."

He poured some more beer into her glass. "I should have contacted you, especially after your book came out."

"Then you did read it."

"Oh, yes. It's a very good job of reporting the war. The chapter on me was romanticized a bit, I'm afraid, but I liked it."

"Mike—"

"What is it?"

How could she put it into words? There was something strange, about him and about this place, but how could she put a name to it? "Mike, you're a reporter. You came back from Vietnam—back from the *dead*—with the greatest news story of the year. And you pass it off as if nothing happened. Mike, why didn't you write that story?"

"I don't know. Like you just said, it didn't seem that important to me."

"Not important!" Somewhere far off, back in the woods, shooting could be heard. "But you're a newsman!" Then she remembered something else. "When I notified *Paris-Match* about your death, they never replied to me."

"I wasn't actually with them any more. They probably weren't that interested in whether I was alive or dead."

"But—"

He drained his glass of beer and leaned back. "It's good seeing you again, Jill. Thanks for what you wrote about me."

"When I phoned your New York number a woman answered."

"Yes."

"She must have warned you I was coming. You weren't surprised to see me."

He smiled slightly. "She warned me. She was afraid I'd be angry with her for telling where I was."

"Are you angry? Are you upset that I wanted to see you again?"

He patted her arm as an uncle might. "I'm pleased, very pleased. But now you should get started back. It's a long drive."

She felt a chill. "Mike—what is it? What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

There was more shooting outside, a bit closer this time. She took a deep breath. "Why did they let you go, Mike? Why did they nurse you back to health and then set you free?"

"I told you."

She stood up. "All right. Perhaps I should be getting back."

"I'm sorry I don't have a good story for you."

"Mike, I didn't come here for a story. I came to see you again. You saved my life—remember?"

"I—"

He was interrupted by the appearance of a hunter in the doorway of the bar. He was dressed in a bright-red jacket and carried a shotgun in the crook of his arm. "Mike," he said, "it's almost time."

"I'll be there in a minute, Garry."

"All right," Jill said with a sigh, extending her hand. "Anyway, it's good to have you back among the living."

Mike Criter held her hand for a moment. "Look, leave me your phone number and I'll try to call you when I get back to town."

"That's not necessary."

"No—I want to."

"You have a girl waiting for you back there."

"She's only a friend—someone to stay with in the city." He seemed about to say more but something held him back.

They went outside, and she saw about a dozen hunters assembled in the parking lot. A tall man in a belted raincoat was speaking to them, as if giving them instructions. "I'll walk you to your car," Mike said.

He deliberately led her away from the assembled hunters. "Mike, what's going on here?"

"What do you mean?"

"They told me in town the lodge had just reopened after having been closed for several years. There's no liquor in the bar. That makes it seem awfully temporary, doesn't it?"

He shrugged. "Maybe they don't have a liquor license yet."

"And those men—what are they doing over there?"

"I think it's a lecture on hunting safety."

She paused at the car door. "I saw a movie once about a woman on shipboard who encountered a man she thought was dead. It turned out they were all dead—everyone on the ship—and they were sailing to hell."

He smiled at that, but it was a sad smile. "I'm alive, Jill. Everyone here is alive."

He seemed to decide something then. He glanced around, making sure no one else was near, and said, "I'll tell you why I'm alive. I'll tell you why the North Vietnamese freed me. Then will you stop asking questions and get out of here?"

She took a deep breath. "Yes."

"They kept me alive because I knew the location of something they wanted. And they freed me when I told them where it was."

"What was it?"

"The state treasury of the South Vietnamese government. Two hundred and twenty million dollars in gold bullion."

"What are you saying?"

"The CIA was supposed to fly it out of the country on that last day, but things got messed up. That's what I was checking on at the airport that day."

"But—"

"I figured they'd have found it sooner or later anyway, so it didn't make that much difference, except to me."

"Does the government know what you did? Were you punished for it?"

Another smile, but thinner this time. "You might say I'm working off my punishment. Now come on, get out of here. You promised no more questions."

She slid into the car and he closed the door behind her. She tried to say more through the open window, but he only shook his head, grimaced. The hunter named Garry was calling to him again.

She drove back down the dirt road that led to town. On the way she passed a blue Cadillac carrying more hunters to the lodge. One of them, in the back seat, looked vaguely familiar as they passed, like someone she had seen long ago in a newspaper photograph or a television interview.

Jill thought about Mike Criter all the way back to New York. Mostly she thought about the gold bullion and why he'd entrusted her with the story.

Was it possible he wanted her to reveal it?

As she sped through the Lincoln Tunnel she remembered she hadn't

given him her phone number. It was in the book, of course, but she wondered if he'd ever bother to look.

The following morning there was a one-column story on the front page of *The New York Times*: FORMER CIA CHIEF DIES IN HUNTING ACCIDENT. She felt numb as she read it.

There was no doubt the shooting had been an accident, the story said, because nearly a dozen other hunters had witnessed the tragedy. She put down the paper, wondering if they all were working off their punishments too, like Mike Criter.

But most of all she was wondering what she should do now.

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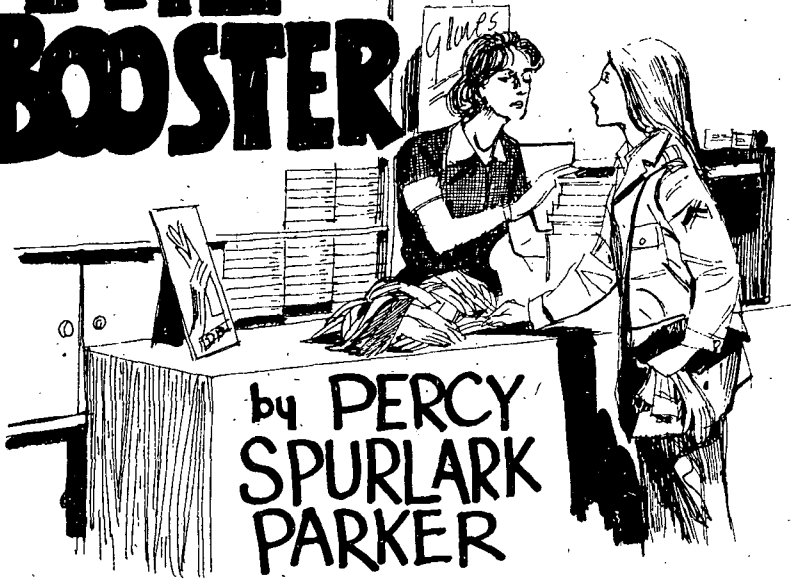
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*She once got a toaster into her bag. . .*

# THE BOOSTER



I slipped the evening gloves in my purse as the sales clerk turned to get a few other pairs off the shelf. She laid them on the counter with the others she had already laid out.

"How are these, Miss?" she asked, her voice a little tired.

I frowned and picked through the gloves. "No, I'm afraid not. Thanks anyway."

I walked away, smiling to myself. I had kept her occupied for a good

fifteen minutes, had made her totally confused about what she was doing, and had gotten away with a twenty-dollar pair of gloves.

There were eight floors in the department store, and so far I'd made a score on the first five. Thank heaven for large shoulder bags. I'd actually gotten a four-slice toaster into mine once, but it didn't leave room for much else.

It was Saturday and the store was pretty full—not so packed that you bumped into someone every two minutes, but full enough to lose yourself in the crowd. It was the ideal condition for a “booster”—or shoplifter in plain language—as long as you kept an eye on the security personnel. The store had both uniformed and plainclothes security people. Sometimes, like the guy standing at the elevators with his hands behind his back, the plainclothesmen are more obvious than those in uniform.

“Oh, Miss.”

I turned, expecting to see the sales clerk with a security guard, but instead a white-haired gentleman was smiling at me.

“Yes?”

He stepped closer, speaking in a low tone. “That was really a very clumsy effort back there.”

Maybe he was from store security and I'd been caught after all. “Look—” I started.

“Don't raise your voice. You don't want to make a scene.”

“What do you want?”

“To help,” he said. “You're a pretty girl, but that's not going to do you any good behind bars. And believe me, young woman, the way you're going at it jail's the only thing ahead for you. Look at yourself—jeans, a fatigue jacket. And that shoulder bag's a dead giveaway. That clerk would have had you back there if she hadn't been totally blind.”

“Look, do you work security for this store or what?”

The smile broadened across his smooth face. “Not hardly, my dear.”

“Then bug off.”

He held up a hand, still smiling. “I said I wanted to help you. I know what I'm doing—now just watch me.”

He looked around, and headed for the cosmetic department. There were several displays of cologne and perfume standing free of the cosmetic counters. He mixed with the customers and made a pass by one of the displays. If he hadn't told me to watch him I wouldn't have

caught it. It was one of the most fluid moves I've ever seen. When he started back toward me he had pocketed two bottles of cologne.

"Now do you believe I know what I'm talking about? I was making a living at this long before you got out of diapers. I usually don't display my talents this way, but you are a lovely girl and I'm curious to see what you look like in a proper dress. Would you join me for dinner tonight? I can teach you a great deal."

I pulled out my I.D., which stated that I was an operative for the Elton Detective Agency. I specialize in running security checks on retail operations, identifying the weak spots and confirming those that are strong. But I'd never had a booster hand himself over to me before. This was going to be good for at least a couple of days off, with pay.



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*There's no such thing as murder in Krowten Corners. . .*

# A NEW WAY TO DIE

by  
STEPHEN  
WASYLYK



Ample supplied with beer and pretzels, Sheriff Hugh Tint was settled in front of his television set for a peaceful Saturday afternoon of football when the telephone rang.

Tint grimaced, reluctantly put down his glass, and reached for the receiver. It was Raster, his young deputy.

"I believe we have a murder on our hands, Sheriff," said Raster.

"Impossible," said Tint. "I've told you many times that there can be

no murder in Krowten Corners."

"All I know is that a man is dead under suspicious circumstances, Chief. He's lying in his plush office over here in the television headquarters building with a very large bruise on his forehead."

"Maybe he had a heart attack and fell and struck his head," said Tint hopefully. "In that business, it's an occupational hazard."

"There's no way he could have done that, Chief. He's slumped over his desk."

Tint sighed. "I'll be there shortly."

He replaced the beer in the refrigerator, contemplated the pretzels for a moment, and then crammed them in alongside the beer. With one last longing look at the TV screen, he turned it off and went outside to his car.

In the parking lot, a handsome young man with curly blond hair ran up to him, waving two small rectangular wafers.

"Pardon me, sir," he said. "Would you care to participate in an impartial test by tasting both these pieces of gum and telling me which you prefer?"

"Certainly," said Tint. "I'm always happy to take part in an independent unbiased survey."

The young man handed him the wafers. One was wrapped in attractive blue paper, the other in black foil imprinted with a red skull and crossbones.

Tint thoughtfully chewed one, then the other. "The one in the black foil is superior," he said.

"DON'T SAY THAT!" the young man screamed.

"I'm sorry," said Tint, "but I must tell the truth. The gum in the black wrapper has more flavor and doesn't stick to my denture."

The young man turned away, sobbing.

Tint soothingly patted him on the shoulder. "There, there. A year or two in kindly old Dr. Wilby's encounter group will straighten you out."

He drove to the television headquarters building—a tall structure in the shape of a gigantic index finger pointing skyward—where he found Raster leaning against the open doorway of an office on the thirteenth floor.

"Why don't we have our usual crowd of curiosity seekers?" he asked the deputy.

"Listen," said Raster, "these people run around like crazy. They wouldn't even take time to answer my questions."

"They'll answer mine," promised Tint grimly. "Where's the body?"

"In here."

The man slumped over the desk had been fortyish, with a half-bald head and plump face. He was wearing a taupe sport jacket and an ultramarine tie. In the center of his forehead was a large deep bruise.

Tint studied the man. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "It's Sugar-Tongue Lafeebe, the most famous play-by-play sportscaster of all time! Do you realize how many millions will weep because they'll nevermore hear that mellifluous voice cry, 'That man really can fly!' or 'He's a genuine all-pro!' on a wintry Sunday afternoon? The game simply won't be the same without him. This can't be murder. No one could be heartless enough to do away with such a Beloved Personality. It has to be an accident."

"I can't see how," said Raster stubbornly. "It appears to me someone deliberately zonked him in the forehead with something heavy."

"Detective-Lieutenant Columbo once told me never to leap to conclusions. Have you looked for a murder weapon?"

"Certainly, Chief. All I found was that big gold football on the desk. I found it on the floor."

"Hm," said Tint, hefting the football. "Metal and rather heavy, but certainly not solid gold. However, I've never heard of anyone being killed by getting hit on the head with a football—even a fake gold one—so I doubt if it could be the murder weapon. Perhaps it's an award of some kind. I'll ask. In the meantime, take the body to kindly old Dr. Wilby and see what he has to say."

"Wilby won't like it."

"His position as medical examiner isn't honorary and doesn't take him away from his compassionate practice of medicine very often. Go."

"You'll have trouble questioning these people, Chief. They all seem to be very busy."

"I'll slow them down," said Tint. He went into the corridor and yelled, "I HAVE THE LATEST RATINGS!"

Within seconds, he was surrounded by everyone within sound of his voice.

"Tell us, tell us!" a nervous man in a pinstriped suit begged.

"I don't have any ratings," confessed Tint. "I want to question you

all about the death of Sugar-Tongue Lafeebe."

The man began to sob. "You're a cruel insensitive person. How can you equate that man dying with something important like the ratings?"

An attractive long-legged young woman with her hair severely pinned back stepped forward. "I was Mr. Lafeebe's secretary," she said.

Tint led her into the office and pointed to the gold football. "What's that?"

"I never saw it before," she said.

Tint motioned to Raster, who was supervising the removal of the body. "You might as well take the football to the office after you leave Wilby and examine it for fingerprints."

"Great!" exclaimed Raster. "I can try out my new Extra-Large Barnaby Jones Detection Kit, complete with microscope."

"Are you sure the gold football was not an award of some type?" Tint asked the secretary.

She moved to a display case. "Here are his awards. The big one is a Niffle, given annually by the football league to the play-by-play sportscaster who uses the highest number of clichés during a broadcast. Mr. Lafeebe won it three times in a row and had permanent possession. As you can see, the gold football is small and surrounded by twenty-eight golden doves on fluted columns."

"What about visitors?" said Tint. "Surely many people came to see such a Beloved Personality."

"Yes," she said. "The first visitor this morning was Venetia Nova-scotia, the long-legged international-tennis superstar. They were to discuss arrangements for Mr. Lafeebe to broadcast her next match."

"I'm sure that would have pleased her very much."

"Not exactly," she said. "I sensed she didn't like Mr. Lafeebe because she never referred to him by name when she asked for him. All she ever said was, 'Is that pompous ass in?'"

"Perhaps that was merely a term of endearment," said Tint. "Who else came to see him today?"

"Pharaoh Inglisi, the famous Italian director."

"I don't believe I've ever seen one of his films," said Tint.

"Oh, Mr. Inglisi doesn't make movies. He makes the only commercials in America with Italian subtitles. Surely you've seen his most famous—the one of the girl in the filmy evening gown on the ice floe next to the car in a howling blizzard. Mr. Inglisi flew the whole crew

to Antarctica to make it. Only six models froze to death before he was satisfied. It won all sorts of awards."

"I was always a little puzzled as to what the ice floe had to do with the car," said Tint.

"You're simply not with it, Sheriff. Commercials aren't supposed to have anything to do with the product—they're supposed to entertain. Would you rather see someone explaining the merits of aspirin or six lovely girls in spangled costumes tap-dancing on an enormous revolving bass drum?"

"The girls, of course, but the noise might give me a headache."

"So you'd run out and buy aspirin," she said triumphantly. "See how it works?"

"Good heavens, that is clever," said Tint. "But tell me about Mr. Inglisi. Did he also like and admire Mr. Lafeebe?"

"I'm not certain since I don't understand the word Mr. Inglisi used when he referred to Mr. Lafeebe. My Italian-English dictionary doesn't list it. The closest I can come is frog-face, but I'm certain that's wrong. Mr. Lafeebe didn't look like a frog."

"Of course not," said Tint. "I'm sure it was a term of admiration. Why did Mr. Inglisi want to see Mr. Lafeebe?"

"They were to make a commercial together for a fabric manufacturer. Mr. Lafeebe was to swing across a hundred-foot chasm while clinging to their new drapery fabric to demonstrate its strength, durability, and long-wearing qualities while fifty beautiful long-legged models cheered. There was to be a hidden safety rope, of course." She frowned. "I wonder why Mr. Inglisi kept cleaning his fingernails with an enormous knife while they talked."

"He must be a fastidious man," said Tint. "Was he the last visitor?"

"No, there was Lonestar Chitlin, the country-and-western singer. He came to discuss Mr. Lafeebe's appearance on his program. It had already been scheduled and Lonestar was offering Mr. Lafeebe a bribe not to appear."

"He was the last visitor?"

"I went to lunch shortly after. When I came back, I found Mr. Lafeebe slumped over his desk."

"I'll need Mr. Chitlin's address," said Tint.

Tucking the address into his pocket, Tint took the elevator to the

A NEW WAY TO DIE

lobby of the building, where he was accosted by an elderly woman pushing a cart laden with two coffee pots and assorted pastries.

"Hold on there, Junior," she said, seizing his arm. "How would you like to take part in an independent unbiased survey?"

"Ordinarily I'd be happy to oblige," said Tint, "but at the moment I have something more important to do."

"**MORE IMPORTANT!**" she screamed. "*More important?* What could be more important than taking part in a scientific experiment around which the happiness and lives of millions of red-blooded Americans will revolve?"

"You're right," said Tint, "I'm sorry. But you must promise not to try to influence my opinion."

"I would never do such a thing," she said indignantly.

She handed him two cups of coffee. One was a delicate piece of attractive porcelain, the other a heavy mug bearing a red skull and crossbones. "Now all you have to do is tell me which one is the instant with the remarkable flavor that is better than brewed and which one is the lousy brewed coffee."

Tint sipped from both cups and handed them back to her. "The one in the beautiful cup is the instant and the one in the ugly mug is the brewed coffee. But there is no comparison in taste—the brewed coffee is far superior, even though it has a slight under-flavor of bitterness from being brewed thirty seconds too long. The other concoction is simply impossible. I would suggest you pour the stuff down the nearest sink."

"Beautiful," she said sadly to herself. "I work hard all day. I don't deserve this. A million people in this lobby and I have to pick on some kind of a crazy foreigner with un-American taste buds." She glared at Tint. "Why don't you go back to your own country?"

Tint found Lonestar Chitlin's home on the edge of town, easily identifying it by the twenty-foot stainless-steel guitar marking the entrance to the driveway.

Lonestar Chitlin was a tall thin man with long wavy snow-white hair, dressed in spangled western clothing.

"I'd like to talk with you about Sugar-Tongue Lafeebe, Mr. Chitlin," said Tint.

"Jes' call me Loney," said Chitlin, striking a chord on the guitar

hanging from his neck. "What do you want to know?"

"Well, Loney, you saw Mr. Lafeebe before lunch. After lunch his secretary found him dead."

"What did he eat? Ah'd like to get a helpin' for some people Ah know."

"He was killed by a blow on the head, presumably from a gold football."

"Waal, now, don't hardly seem likely Ah would do somethin' like thet. If he died from bein' hit with a geetar, Ah mought know somethin' about it, but then Ah don't think Ah'd waste a good geetar on thet bum."

Tint frowned. "I don't understand. Sugar-Tongue was a Beloved Personality but you speak as though you didn't like him."

"He was a double-dyed, hornswogglin' bum—as dangerous to everyone as a pair of angry rattlers in a downy sleepin' bag. Whoever sent him to thet Big Stadium in the Sky should get a year's supply of black-eyed peas. Ah'm only sorry Ah din't do it. Now if you'll excuse me, Sheriff, Ah have to go to the recordin' studio where my long-legged all-girl band in spangled suits is waitin' for me to cut another hit record."

Tint went back to the office. Raster was already there, examining the gold football through an enormous magnifying glass.

He lifted his head. "Say, Chief, there are a lot of fingerprints on this ball, most of them yours and mine, but there is a strange set with something peculiar about one print. The way the loops and whirls are broken it seems almost as though it was made by someone with a wet thumb."

"Are you certain it isn't a callus?"

"Absolutely, Chief. My Barnaby Jones magnifying glass doesn't lie. I can see beads of moisture."

Tint sighed. "Then I must accept that—even though you've eliminated my prime suspect, Lonestar Chitlin, whom I sense didn't like Mr. Lafeebe. The callus Loney has on his thumb from years of guitar strumming would have shown clearly."

"I considered it so unusual I mentioned it to kindly old Dr. Wilby. He says it's obviously from a man who has retrogressed into childhood and taken to sucking his thumb, which accounts for the gold football. A

football is a toy, he said, and grown men do not play with footballs."

"An old croquet player like Doc would say that. Did he examine the body?"

"Yes. And he became quite excited. He said the man had been hit on the head with the gold football and had promptly died from it."

"Then I must accept that too," said Tint. "The man is a genius at diagnosing strange traumas that baffle the rest of the medical profession. If you brought him a routine skull fracture, he'd say the man had died from sneezing too hard. However, we now have two clues. We must look for a man with a wet thumb who plays with a gold football. Perhaps we'll find something in the files."

Raster groaned. "Not the files, Chief."

Tint bristled. "What's wrong with the files? Didn't I compile them painstakingly by personally observing five thousand spine-tingling detective dramas, three thousand heart-racing police shows, and a hundred and thirty-seven specially-made-for-TV full-length movies? You know, Raster, that every conceivable method for one human to dispose of another, along with seven hundred and sixty-eight motives, is contained in those files. I'll start with Beloved Personalities, Motives for the Elimination Of. In view of Dr. Wilby's findings, I suggest you check out Mysterious Circumstances."

They fingered through the files in silence until Raster sighed. "I'm afraid there's nothing here about gold footballs, Chief."

"Then Wilby must be wrong," said Tint sadly. "If it's possible to kill a man with a gold football, those television writers would have done it a hundred times."

He frowned. "There must be something I've overlooked."

"Why do you say that, Chief?"

"According to my Steve McGarret's personally autographed copy of *Twelve Tenets for Crime Detectors*, the last one says if you can't solve the crime, you've overlooked something."

"I was thinking," said Raster. "If Lonestar Chitlin was the last visitor, and he isn't responsible, and the secretary went out to lunch, couldn't someone have entered the office while she was gone?"

"Good heavens," said Tint, "I'll call her immediately. Perhaps she noticed something."

The secretary was very polite on the phone. "I'm extremely busy," she said. "I'm now the secretary for Finlandia Zerk, the international



talk-show hostess. She's appeared on more than five thousand talk shows."

"She must be a remarkable conversationalist," said Tint. "What does she talk about?"

"Her husbands," said the secretary. "She's had nineteen of them."

Tint heard a heavily accented voice in the background say, "Twenty, cookie pie. I was smashed again last night."

"Twenty, Sheriff," said the secretary.

"She has my best wishes," said Tint, "but all I want to know is if you saw anyone who might have gone into Mr. Lafeebe's office while you were out to lunch."

The phone wires hummed.

"Well, there might have been someone," said the secretary slowly. "I saw a shabbily dressed man in an oversized taupe plaid sport coat and carrying a large paper bag in the hall as I waited for the elevator."

"What did he look like?"

"Well, he was short and smoking a horrible-smelling cigar—not the type of person we're accustomed to finding in our building."

"Thank you," said Tint.

He turned to Raster. "We must find a short man in a taupe plaid sport coat, smoking a horrible-smelling cigar, who has a wet thumb and plays with a gold football."

"Gee, Chief, I wouldn't know where to look."

Tint thought for a moment. "I have an idea. We've been thinking in terms of Emmyland. But everyone in Emmyland smokes good cigars. However—"

Raster blanched. "You don't mean—"

Tint nodded. "We must also look in Rerun Acres and Cerebral Heights."

Raster groaned. "Aw, Chief, let's not go to those places. Those people in Rerun Acres talk so fast and loud they make my ears hurt and the ones in Cerebral Heights always ask for money, which makes me feel bad because I hate to see intelligent people begging."

"We have our duty, Raster. I won't be able to sleep, even during a game show, unless we solve the circumstances of Sugar-Tongue's death. Now polish your badge and let's go."

Raster sighed. "One moment, Chief." He took off his shoe and slipped his money inside. "You can't be too careful with those people."

They crossed the railroad tracks that separated Emmyland from the lower end of town, called Rerun Acres. The change was apparent the moment they crossed the line. While the streets in Emmyland were tree lined, well paved, and reflected a certain affluence, in Rerun Acres they were rundown, the potholes badly patched. Lining the curb of the main street was a seemingly endless row of men, each with a small case supported by folding legs before him. Yelling and waving objects that ranged from shining kitchen tools to record albums, they harangued the milling crowd. All wore loud plaid sport coats and big horn-rimmed glasses.

The din was terrific. Raster covered his ears.

Tint stopped beside a stand where a man was demonstrating a combination vegetable-knife/bottle-opener/paint-scraper/glass-cutter.

"Hey, friend!" shouted the man. "Tell you what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna let you have one of these Swedish steel kitchen helpers for only \$9.95. Handiest tool in the house. Every member of the family will find a use for it. Better grab one before they go bye-bye at this low price."

"Just shut up and listen before I take *you* bye-bye," said Tint. "I'm looking for a man in a taupe plaid sport coat who smokes a horrible-smelling cigar."

"Ha," said the man. "You've described half the men in Rerun Acres."

"With a wet thumb," added Raster.

"Ah," said the man. "Now that's different. You can be speaking of only one man—one of our leading entrepreneurs—good old Harvey Fiddleneck. Old Harve's thumb is always wet because that's the way he counts his money. You know. Like this." He wet his thumb and began flipping imaginary bills in his other hand.

"Where can we find this Harvey Fiddleneck?"

"You can't miss him. His office is right down the street. Harvey will be the short man with an enormous wad of money clutched in his left hand, talking on the phone. He's the greatest entrepreneur Rerun Acres has ever seen. Harve can sell anything. A few years ago he cornered the market on used inner tubes, sliced them up, and sold the pieces at \$9.95 each as a new type of exerciser." He seemed to notice Tint's badge for the first time. "Old Harve hasn't got out of line, has he? After all, it's still *caveat emptor* in this fair land, right, Sheriff?"

"It always will be," said Tint. "It's in the Constitution."

They continued down the street. At the corner, a small heavy man—his hat brim turned up, a big cigar projecting from the corner of his mouth, and a stack of bills in his left hand—had crammed himself into a phone booth and was shouting into the mouthpiece.

"I said three cents each, and no more! What do you care what I sell them for? Don't I take all the risks? How do I know if I can dump a hundred thousand records of the Siberian Balalaika Band playing *The Last Time I Saw Vladivostok*? Think it over and call me."

He hung up and turned to Tint. "If you want me to handle another batch of plastic slipcovers, get lost, buddy."

Tint put a thumb behind his badge and pushed it forward.

Fiddleneck shook his head. "What's the beef? I always deliver exactly what I say I will. Every Fiddleneck item carries my personal money-back guarantee. If someone hasn't received something, it probably got lost in the mail."

"Do you know a man named Sugar-Tongue Lafeebe?" asked Tint.

"Sure. Old Sugar-Tongue and I went to Redundant University together. He did the football broadcasts while I sold hot dogs in the stands. We've been good friends ever since."

"Did you see him today around lunchtime?"

"I talked to old Sugar-Tongue, yes. I had a business deal for him."

"He seems to be dead," said Tint.

Fiddleneck's eyes grew wide. "No kidding? Imagine that."

"Suppose you tell us why you went to his office, Mr. Fiddleneck."

"Of course. I wanted him to endorse my newest novelty item. It's sure to sell a million. Look, I'll show you." He reached into a canvas bag at his feet and drew out a gold football.

He held it up. "Watch closely." He pressed a hidden catch. The football opened slowly like a blooming lily, revealing twenty-eight small masts, each bearing a flag with the insignia of a professional football team, while a tiny tape recorder rotated in the center, giving forth a tinny rendition of "Stars and Stripes Forever" played on a hundred kazoos.

Raster's gaze was filled with longing.

"Remarkable," said Tint. "That's exactly like the gold football we found in Mr. Lafeebe's office."

"Of course," said Fiddleneck. "I left one with old Sugar-Tongue."

"Suppose you tell us about it," said Tint.

"Well, I went over there but that snooty secretary wouldn't let me into the office, so I waited until she went to lunch and sneaked in. Old Sugar-Tongue was glad to see his old college buddy, I can tell you. I showed him the football and told him I'd give him ten percent if he'd endorse it and tape the commercial. But ten percent wasn't enough for him. All right, I said, I'm a generous man who doesn't care about money. I offered him twenty percent and counted out ten thousand in cash as an advance. He sneered. I never saw anybody sneer before, but old Sugar-Tongue always had a way about him. He said he wanted ninety percent. Well, I couldn't afford a deal like that. I spoke softly and tried to reason with him, but he sat there sneering at me. Now mind you, I WAS VERY CALM ABOUT THE WHOLE THING! I'M NOT THE TYPE TO GET UPSET ABOUT AN OLD COLLEGE BUDDY PUTTING THE CLAMPS ON ME, EVEN IF HE SNEERS WHILE DOING IT! I JUST REMAINED CALM AND COOL AND COLLECTED!"

Fiddleneck took a handkerchief from his pocket and passed it over his face.

"I can certainly see you weren't upset," said Tint. "I suppose that's what business experience does for you."

"You said it, Sheriff. The name of the game is self-control. Anyway, Sugar-Tongue finally yelled some very bad words at me and told me to get out, but even that didn't upset me. As a gesture of our friendship, I told him he could keep the football I had with me, and I gently tossed it to him and walked out."

"I commend you on your mature behavior," said Tint. "At least that explains how the football came to be in the office. Is it possible that when you tossed it to him, the football struck him on the forehead?"

"Not impossible, I suppose."

"I see," said Tint. He sighed. "It's obvious, of course, that Sugar-Tongue Lafeebe suffered from a very soft skull and his death was accidental. As I said, no one could wish to deliberately harm such a Beloved Personality. You'll explain all of this at the inquiry, but I'm certain no one will hold you responsible. It was just one of those unfortunate things. But you'll have to accompany me to headquarters until the matter is settled."

As the three of them walked up the street, Fiddleneck wetting his

thumb and counting his money, a beautiful scantily dressed young woman with long legs reached out and seized Raster's arm.

"Look what I have for you," she whispered breathlessly through a cloud of overpowering perfume as she held up a small envelope. "In here are one dozen magic tablets with a secret ingredient that is the result of space-age research. When dissolved in plain ordinary chlorinated tap water and applied to your house plants on a regular schedule they will make your living room a tropics in just two weeks—guaranteed."

Raster gazed into her eyes. "How much?"

"Only \$17.95 plus two dollars' postage," she whispered.

Raster removed his shoe and thrust two tens at her which she surreptitiously slipped to Fiddleneck as Raster limped ahead up the street, clutching the packet in his hand.

"What do you intend to do with those tablets?" asked Tint.

"You heard her. Feed my houseplants," said Raster.

"You don't have any houseplants," said Tint.

"*Caveat emptor*," said Fiddleneck, wetting his thumb and counting his money.



How could he parlay the \$2.25 in his pocket into a new life? . . .

# STREETER'S PROGRESS

by  
**FRANK  
SISK**



As he began to let himself into the apartment Streeter was boozily aware that it was long after midnight. He hoped Mona was asleep.

Fitting the key to the lock was one hell of a problem. The maneuver was made no easier by the pair of license plates tucked under his right arm. He was deciding to set them on the floor when they slid away in different directions and landed on the parquet with a resounding clatter. At the same time he dropped the keyring, which clinked distinctly

against the metal threshold.

"Damn it all, Jerry," he whispered. "Be quiet, man. You got to be quiet."

He got down on his knees. Just as he retrieved the keys the door opened.

Mona was wide awake, though dressed for bed. Her bottle-blond hair was waffled in pink plastic curlers. A layer of white cream lent her full face an oily pallor. Her lashless green eyes regarded him with fixed sufferance.

Reaching for the license plates, he said, "Hi, Mona. You're still up."

"Yeah, and you're down—on all fours like a hound dog. Where have you been till this hour?"

"Out."

"And I ought to lock you out the rest of the night. You sure got a skin full."

He struggled to his feet, the license plates clasped to the front of his topcoat.

"What's with those?" Mona, squinting, leaned forward to read the numbers. "Ain't they from our car?"

"Right."

"Then what're you carrying them around for?"

"The car don't need plates no more."

"Don't need—" She stood aside and spoke through tight lips. "Get in here before you wake the neighbors."

"Good idea."

She closed the door behind him and fixed the chain. "O.K., Jerry. Cut the clowning. What's this about the car don't need plates?"

Listing a little to port, he said archly, "Old hunk-a-junk is now old wreck."

"You mean you totaled the car?"

"Abso-so-lutely!"

"And you just walked away from it? With the plates?"

"Walked away from it without a scratch," he said with a note of pride.

"Where'd it happen?"

"Outside the city where the trees begin." He dumped the plates noisily on a table. "I could use a drink."

"How did it happen?"

"A big tree jumped off the side of the road and—*blam!*"  
"How come you weren't arrested, as soused as you are?"  
"Nobody around. I could really use a drink, Mona."  
"So could I. Good night."

Streeter woke late the next morning on the living-room sofa, still fully dressed to his topcoat. His old felt hat with its frayed red feather sat upside down on the floor nearby.

He knew it was late, around eleven o'clock, because the rays of sunlight entering the east-facing window reached only to the middle of the rug. He confirmed this with a bleary look at his wristwatch: 11:07.

He felt alone in the apartment.

"Mona!" His voice was a hoarse croak. A fissure of pain widened inside his skull.

After a few minutes he eased off the sofa, stockingfooted, and nearly tripped over his shoes. He padded to the open bedroom door.

The bed was unmade. The dressing table was its usual disarray of perfumes, face powders, creams, aerosol sprays, combs, and hairpins. Mona wasn't there.

"What a slob, what a slob," he said aloud.

On the way to the kitchen he shed his coat, dropping it on the wicker armchair. The sink and the counter contained dirty pans and dishes.

So what else is new? he thought.

He opened the wheezing refrigerator, empty except for wrapped leftovers, a jar of ersatz coffee cream, and two cans of beer. Two cans of beer, while not enough to quench the fire in his parched throat, were better than none. He'd downed the first beer before he noticed the yellow sheet of paper battened to the kitchen table by the sugar bowl. Crumpling the empty can in his hand, he read the message:

First you get caned from your lousy "job," then you get us in hock to a "freindly" loan co, and finely you brake the camels back by rapping our car while drunk around a tree.

I have had it with you, Jerry. I am going to Ma's till you straiten out if ever. And don't bother phoning unless you can prove you are 100% out of the woods.

Mona



Till death do us part, he thought ironically.

Going to the phone in the living room, he dialed. Mona's mother lived on the other—the better—side of town in a tidy little unmortgaged house that had been left to her with the proceeds of a nice insurance policy by Mona's father.

The old girl answered after the third ring.

"Ma—" he always used this form of address in the increasingly futile hope of ingratiating himself with her—"this is Jerry. May I speak to Mona?"

"She's just stepped out for a moment, Jerry." The voice was her phone voice, hoity-toity.

"I see. Well, Ma, when she steps back in will you have her give me a buzz?"

"Most certainly, Jerry."

That was that. "She has just stepped out for a moment" was what the old girl said whenever Mona was supposed to be there but was somewhere else.

Streeter took a shower.

Halfway through it he began to recall the previous evening's main event.

First there was the tree, then there was the wall. He had grazed the tree but hit the wall head-on. Chrome had snapped loose and a geyser of water had spouted from the top of the ruptured radiator.

He dimly remembered sitting up against the steering wheel and staring through the cracked windshield. He had sat for maybe four or five minutes, waiting for the cops to arrive and arrest him.

But nobody appeared.

Where the hell had he been anyway?

He stepped from the shower and reached for a none-too-clean towel.

Was it a cemetery? Yes! Saint Benedict's. That road lined with trees, of course. The service road running outside the cemetery wall. And across from it, a big stretch of lawn. It was part of the fairway belonging to the Municipal Golf Club. It was a dead area after dark, the deadest in town around midnight.

While shaving he remembered the drunken ingenuity that had inspired him to abandon the crippled jalopy. He grinned at his reflection in the steamy mirror. He had stripped it of all evidence of ownership.

Lacking a screwdriver, he had used his only coin, a quarter, to remove the plates.

Of course, the car might be traced through its engine number. If it had an engine number. He'd bought it secondhand two years ago in a bar from a gent named Eli Tuggle at half the price it would have fetched on the open market. No questions asked.

On the way out of the apartment Streeter had a fine shady thought. He went back to where the license plates lay on the scarred table beside the sofa and took them to the kitchen. From a chair on which Mona stacked discarded newspapers he picked up yesterday's edition and folded it around the plates, then slipped the package inside the right-hand pocket of the topcoat, causing it to sag unstylishly.

What the hell, he thought.

The four-block walk down Sinclair to Main stimulated an unexpected desire for other nourishment than beer. A glass of chilled grapefruit juice would hit the spot. A couple of toasted English. Black coffee.

Unbuttoning the sagging coat, he checked the money pocket of his slacks. The quarter and two limp singles.

Lucky to have that much, he thought. If he'd parked his pants Mona would have it.

He turned left on Main. The ninth facade along the block presented a niggardly narrowness labeled WALLY'S SNACKS. It had a straight white counter and anchored stools. At the rear was a grill, refrigerator, coffee urn, and four-slice toaster; also a doorway a fat man couldn't have passed through that led to a small storeroom. In the neighborhood it was eye-winking gossip that when the storeroom door was closed Wally was prone back there on the gunny sacks, and not always alone.

Streeter's watch read 2:17 P.M. as he entered and sat on the stool nearest the door. There was only one other customer, a skinny old dame in a drab brown cardigan. She was having a cigarette and coffee.

The storeroom door was open, a kid in his late teens leaning against the frame. He wore a stained white coat and apron and had a greasy black ponytail. As he approached to take Streeter's order he brought a painful assortment of pimples into focus.

He served the grapefruit juice first, then went back to toast the muf-

fins and pour the coffee. When he returned with the rest of the order Streeter said, "You're new here, ain'cha?"

"I been here a week."

"What's your name?"

"Rick."

"I'm Chuck." Streeter figured there was no reason to let Wally know who was checking up on him. "Is the boss around?"

"Wally? No."

"But you're expecting him soon?"

"Not really," the kid said. "Not until six."

"That's funny, Rick. I got an appointment to meet him here in—" he pushed the coat sleeve back from his wristwatch "—in about ten minutes."

"He didn't say nothin' about no appointment when he took off, man."

"Well, maybe he just forgot to mention it. If Wally makes an appointment he keeps it."

"I think he had other things on his mind."

"Yeah, like what?"

"A fancy blonde chick, man." The kid's knowing grin was wide. "She come in before lunch and asked him to drive her somewhere and. Wally he just ripped off his apron and went. Left me alone with the rush hour, man."

"Did he say when he'd be back?"

"Six, like I already said. That's my quittin' time, and he better be here."

Streeter paid the check and tipped the kid twenty cents. That left him a total of a buck fifteen. He'd have to start hustling. Meanwhile the watch would have to go.

Crossing Main on the WALK light, he reflected on what he'd just learned. For the last several months he'd half suspected that Mona was messing around with Wally. Now his suspicion was confirmed. Not that it mattered a hell of a lot. He was held to Mona only by a certain sexual pliability in her that appealed to him. And then there was Ma's money in the offing. Not that the old girl looked at death's door. Fact of the matter was she was healthy as a brood mare and would probably live long enough to spend her last cent.

He arrived at Olsen's We Buy We Sell We Give Estimates and went inside. Hanging from the ceiling were dozens of guitars, plain and elec-

tric. He went to a counter at the back of the store and waited a patient minute until Olsen, a hairless gnome of a man in a blue velveteen vest, appeared through a curtained doorway.

"Yes?" he inquired with an eerie sibilance.

Streeter slipped the watch from his wrist. "I'd like a loan on this."

Olsen took the watch to a goosenecked lamp on a rolltop desk behind the counter and turned on the light.

"How much do you want?" he asked as he examined the dial with a magnifying glass.

"Top dollar."

"All right. Twenty."

"Ridiculous. Do you know what it's worth retail?"

"Yes."

"Two hundred bucks."

"No, I'm afraid."

"What do you mean you're afraid? I paid two hundred bucks for it outa my own pocket."

"You paid too much." Olsen switched off the goosenecked lamp and stepped back to the counter. "Twenty."

"Make it twenty-five. I'll be redeeming it in a couple a days."

"Twenty."

Son of a bitch, Streeter thought as he ambled south on Main, two sawbucks in the money pocket with the single and change. I gave Eli Tuggle sixty for that watch because he said it was worth at least a double C. You can't trust nobody.

He had a mind to go to Sol's Social Saloon, a Tuggle hangout at the corner of Main and Water, and give the slimy bastard a loud piece of his mind for all present to hear, but as he was passing a high-priced boutique, Mlle. Francine's, his peripheral vision spotted something—a parked car with the key in the ignition!

He'd planned on scouting around toward dusk for exactly this setup!

He walked half a dozen steps, easing to the curb out of the path of other pedestrians, then strolled back to the car. A dark blue Chevy Impala not long off the assembly line. He checked the meter it was parked at: 30 mins 1 dime, 60 mins max 2 dimes.

The red arrow indicated fifty-two minutes were still left, which told Streeter that the owner of the car expected to be away more than

thirty minutes and maybe nearly an hour.

He glanced toward the boutique's display window. A collection of autumnal accessories was scattered against a burnt-orange backdrop that blocked a view of the interior. Good, he thought. If he couldn't see in, they couldn't see out.

He walked around the car, opened the front door, and got behind the wheel. He smelled a musky perfume as he closed the door that somehow reassured him. He figured a woman would take twice as long as a man to realize the car was stolen and report it to the cops.

He drove out along Lafayette Boulevard to Saint Benedict's Cemetery. Just before taking the service road he noticed a sign extending out over the sidewalk—RENDEZVOUS RESTAURANT—and remembered fuzzily being there last night.

Poplar trees lined the side of the road next to the cemetery wall. He drove slowly, searching for an entrance gate. Soon he saw a tree with a gash low on its trunk. There was no other evidence of the accident.

About a hundred yards further on he found an entrance. A priest was solemnizing a burial off to the left, so he turned right; eventually reaching the seclusion he wanted beside a gray mausoleum inscribed with the names JOHN P. O'SULLIVAN—MARY S. O'SULLIVAN.

The Chevy's plates were fastened with Phillips screws. He'd have had a hell of a job trying to remove them with the change in his pocket—a nickel and a dime—but luck played along with him. In the trunk he found a small toolbox and in the box the right tool.

Five minutes later his own battered plates were on the Chevy and he was wrapping the legits in the newspaper and putting them on the floor of the back seat.

This might be the start of a regular hustle, he thought.

The gauge showed the gas tank to be nearly full as he left the cemetery. A good omen.

Feeling safe and satisfied, he drove to Main and Water and parked the car in the FOR PATRONS ONLY lot behind Sol's Social Saloon.

Sol himself was tending bar, a red apron covering his expansive belly. A couple of regulars were present but not Eli Tuggle.

Slapping a sawbuck on the dark wood, Streeter ordered a vodka on the rocks with a twist and asked, "Tuggle been in yet?"

"In and out," Sol said.

"Is he due back?"

"Is the sun gonna set?"

A few hours later, the sun did set but Tuggle was still absent.

Preparing to leave, Streeter said, "When he comes in, Sol, tell him I got a business proposition."

"Tell who?"

"Tuggle. I'll be back later tonight."

"Oh, yeah. Right on, Jerry."

The vodkas had kindled a warm optimism in his guts. He was sure he could unload the Chevy for maybe fifteen Cs and still leave Tuggle plenty of profit in the hot market. All he had to do was find the guy.

At 10:20 P.M., having searched unsuccessfully in a series of gin mills for Tuggle, Streeter sat disconsolately in an all-night cafeteria with a ham-and-cheese on rye and a cup of black coffee. Neither drunk nor sober, he was on that grey plateau in between.

Should he go back to Sol's for a last look? Or should he go home and begin again tomorrow?

Left in the money pocket at last count was a mere \$3.58.

Chewing the tasteless sandwich, Streeter stared indecisively into the window facing his table. Its semi-opaqueness was disconcerting. The dim outlines of the street outside were overlaid with reflections of things inside. Imbedded in the Cameo Cinema marquee was a section of aluminum steam table. Whenever he lifted the white coffee mug it became a shivering part of a nearby fire hydrant. The few people in the cafeteria at this off-hour moved occasionally like ghosts along the brick walls of the theater. He became particularly conscious of two shadows bent conspiratorially toward each other across a tabletop midair a few feet to the right of the hydrant.

To get a direct look at them he went to the counter for another cup of coffee.

The conspirators—two men—occupied a table against the wall ten feet or so diagonally behind his. Except for giving the impression of soft-spoken intrigue, they were as unlike as apples and bananas.

The one who seemed to be doing most of the listening was a slender, fortyish, fairly well dressed type smoking a cigarette in an ebony holder. The talker—who was practically whispering—was short, fat, and bug-eyed behind thick horn-rimmed glasses. He wore an old porkpie

hat and a weathered mackintosh.

Streeter studied the pair obliquely while the counterman was getting his coffee. On the floor between Porkpie's scuffed shoes stood a shiny black satchel the size and shape of those used by doctors in the long-gone day of the house call. He was idly speculating on its contents when the man lifted it to his lap and began to unbuckle the straps.

Back at his own table, Streeter sat this time with the window behind him. Stirring sugar into his coffee, he kept an eye on Porkpie while ostentatiously affecting the glazed appearance of one lost in a brown study.

Porkpie dipped a plump hand into the satchel's open mouth, then paused for a darting glance around the cafeteria. There was a brief moment when Streeter felt the man's eyes, magnified by the thick-lensed glasses, penetrating his own, but then Porkpie resumed as if certain he wasn't being observed.

From the satchel he took two substantial packets of greenbacks and slid them across the table to his companion. That gent quickly dropped one each into either pocket of his camelhair coat and then, with a nod of assent, the cigarette holder protruding from his smiling lips at a jaunty angle, he rose from the table and left.

In the next few minutes Porkpie ate a previously neglected doughnut, sucked milk through a straw from a half-pint carton, lighted a black cigar, dusted his fingers with a paper napkin, rebuckled the satchel, and proceeded slowly to the cashier's cage where he paid the check.

Streeter was cold sober now. Porkpie *looked* like easy prey, but these little fat guys could fool you. They could turn out to be karate experts, might even be packing iron. You had to take a guy like Porkpie by surprise.

Getting suddenly to his feet, Streeter nearly tipped over the catsup bottle. Grabbing it just in time, he then reflexively transferred it to his topcoat pocket.

Outside the cafeteria, Streeter watched Porkpie unlock the door of a VW parked halfway up the block. The Chevy stood several cars behind it.

He dogged Porkpie the length of Purchase Street to Maple Avenue and along Maple to Lafayette Boulevard. They passed the Rendezvous Restaurant and the northern reaches of Saint Benedict's Cemetery, and

Streeter was beginning to think Porkpie was heading out of town, when the VW turned right into a street whose sign was illegible and came to a stop at the curb almost directly in front of a yellow-brick apartment building. Bright luminaires arched over the entrance walkway.

Dousing the Chevy's headlights, Streeter guided the car to a creeping halt discreetly behind. This was a residential neighborhood, shabbily genteel, where people would walk their dogs before retiring. For the moment, however, it seemed deserted.

He realized if he were to act at all he'd have to act fast. He was out of the Chevy a second before Porkpie extricated himself from the Bug.

"Freeze where you are." Streeter used a tone and phrase familiar to him from TV. "I got iron on you, man."

Porkpie, satchel in hand, faced him goggle-eyed. Then, as if from habit, he slammed shut the car door.

"I said freeze!" Streeter was holding the catsup bottle in his pocket so that it protruded like a concealed weapon. "One more move, and you're dead."

"What's it you want, fella?" Porkpie asked in a friendly voice.

"That satchel."

"This satchel?"

"Right."

"Well, you got it, fella." And with surprising agility Porkpie stepped forward and swung the bag at Streeter's head.

His own agile footwork saved Streeter from more than a glancing blow on the left shoulder. He hauled the catsup bottle from his pocket and brought it down solidly on Porkpie's porkpie. Already off balance, the fat little man went the rest of the way to the ground.

Streeter looked at the stricken figure for a nervous moment, the bottle still intact in his hand, then grabbed the satchel and moved.

Streeter sat pleasantly relaxed in the wicker armchair. On his lap sat the open satchel. Inside, the austere face of Andrew Jackson gazed up at him from ten packets of twenties, with fifty bills to a packet.

Ten K, he told himself for the dozenth time. Damn it if I ain't rich. Somebody knocked heavily on the door.

Streeter leaped as if catapulted from the chair and closed the satchel. "Who's there?"



"The police. Open up."

"What do you guys want this time of night? I'm getting ready for bed!"

"We got nice beds downtown, Jerry. Open up."

"O.K., just a sec."

He went to the sofa on which he'd slept so soundly the previous night and dropped the satchel behind it.

Until his arrival at Detective Sergeant Krumholt's desk Streeter wasn't sure why he'd been picked up—for auto theft or for mugging Porkpie. Or both.

"This isn't your style, Jerry." Krumholt's bland face and soft voice carried gentle reproof.

"What do you have reference to, Sarge?"

"Assaulting fat little old blind guys, Jerry."

"Blind guys? Where you comin' from?"

"Well, almost blind. The doctor at the hospital says Rufus Boardman can't see a hand in front of his face without glasses."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Who's Rufus Boardman?"

"Guy you beaned with a billy or something a few hours ago out on Maple Street."

"Where's Maple Street, Sarge?"

"I'll get you a map." Frowning sadly, Krumholt opened a folder on his desk. "Here's your rap sheet, Jerry. Eleven busts in the last two years, every damn one of them for making book. And six of them—can that be right?—six of them in the last four months! Hell, Jerry, you must be getting sloppy."

"Railroaded is more like it."

"So sloppy, I hear, that Tuck Swazey got tired of paying the fines and gave you the old heave-ho."

"You guys hear funny things."

"Don't try snowing me, Jerry. I know you went off Swazey's payroll a good three weeks ago. I also know there's no way you qualify for unemployment comp. So I begin to wonder where you get the dough to feed your great thirst and all."

"Today I pawned a watch. You can check that out."

"Oh, I believe it. But a reliable young lady tells me she saw you on Maple Avenue earlier tonight and I believe her too."

"She must be on something."

"She says she was coming out of the apartment house in front of which you slugged Boardman. She saw you do the deed. She admits she didn't get a good look at your face, but she described your build and that filthy topcoat you're wearing to a T. Besides, when you made a U-turn to get out of there, she got a clear view of your rear license plate and jotted down the number. Motor Vehicle informs us the plate was issued to one Gerald L. Streeter of two-three-eight Sinclair Street, this city."

Streeter was beginning to feel pretty good about the situation. In their zeal to haul in the owner of the plates they had overlooked the fact that they were attached to the wrong car. Which meant he wasn't suspected of auto theft. And he knew enough about evidence to realize that an eyewitness who couldn't identify a mug shot wouldn't stand up in court.

"Sarge," he said, "we both know anyone can get a license number mixed up. Even in daylight."

"That area's bright as day, Jerry. Lights galore."

"Well, what does what's-his-name say?"

"Nothing yet. He's in the hospital with a concussion."

"Then I guess you can't hold me."

"Don't kid yourself, Jerry. With your record I can hold you for felonious mopey."

"What's the bail?"

"Oh, say a thou."

"Can I make a call?"

Krumholt offered the desk phone.

"Could I use the booth in the hall?"

"Hey, Si," Krumholt said, swiveling around in his chair and catching the eye of a detective. "Be good enough to escort our guest to the phone booth."

Streeter stood up with an uneasy expression. "I just remembered, Sarge. They took my dough away downstairs. I need a dime."

"Swell. You cost Swazey. Now you're costing me. Here."

The phone rang a long time before the old girl answered it.

"Hello, and may I ask who's calling at this hour of the night?"

"Ma, this is Jerry. I got to talk to Mona. And don't tell me she just

stepped out."

"She's asleep in bed. Do you know what time it is?"

"Not exactly." He lowered his voice so as not to be overheard by the detective who was loitering outside the booth. "But wake her up. Tell her it's a matter of money. Big money."

"Well, now, I don't— Oh, here she is, coming down the stairs."

Mona sounded awake and angry. "Listen, creep. Din't I tell you not to call here?"

"Hold on, Mona. I got good news."

"Like what?"

"Like a bundle of big bread."

"Oh yeah?" Then guardedly, "Where you callin' from?"

"Police headquarters."

"That's jolly. See you around."

"Hold it, Mona, listen! Go to the apartment. Look behind the sofa. You'll find a satchel there. Full of money. Take out a thousand and come down here and bail me out. Then I'll fill you in on the whole story."

"What you been drinkin', Jerry?"

"Do like I say, Mona. You'll see."

As soon as he hung up he realized what a stupid mistake he'd just made.

Five days later Streeter was taken from his cell in the county jail to stand in a lineup with three other inmates and a guard in civvies. He was pretty sure porkpie Rufus Boardman was on the viewing side of the one-way window. If so, the man's astigmatism prevented him from identifying his assailant and in less than an hour Streeter was signing a receipt for the return of his shoelaces, belt, necktie, keys, and money.

The morning sky was leaden. The promise of snow lurked in the chilly air. Streeter turned up the thin collar of his topcoat and walked briskly along South Avenue to Main. He wasn't really surprised to find a card taped on the inside of the glass door to Wally's that read, CLOSED FOR ALTERATIONS.

He went to the phone booth in the news store at the corner of Main and Sinclair and dialed the old girl's number.

"Good morning!" she answered cheerily.

"Depends where you're standin'," he said. "Is Mona there?"

"Jerry?"

"Yes."

"No, Mona is not here, Jerry. She's taking a well deserved vacation in Mexico."

"With a deserving short-order cook. Right?"

"I don't like your implication," the old girl said and hung up.

Well, Streeter thought, I still got the Chevy.

He intended to pick it up from the apartment house lot and start looking again for Eli Tuggle. Though he feared, with less than three bucks in his kick, he was heading for a buyer's market.

Arriving at 238 Sinclair, he made sure the car was still intact, then went to the lobby. His clothes reeked of jail and he wanted to change them for some others. But just inside the lobby door, much to his amazement, he was accosted by the man he'd privately dubbed Porkpie. Rufus Boardman. His eyes bulging exaggeratedly behind the thick lenses, his stained teeth were bared in a grin and clenching the butt of a black cigar.

"Good day, Mr. Streeter," he said. "I thought you might drop by."

Agape, Streeter said, "What you doin' here?"

"I'm here to thank you for doing me a favor. Is there a place we can talk unobserved?"

"A favor? What's your game?"

"An unwitting favor. Now where can we talk?"

"Upstairs. My apartment."

"You don't live here any more, Streeter. Or so I've been informed by the superintendent."

"What?"

"He said your wife moved out five days ago and turned in the keys."

"Tramp."

"Maybe she did you an unwitting favor also. Do you still have a car?"

"Well, yeah."

"Let's use it for an office. I was forced to abandon my own little vehicle at the spot you decked me. For reasons I'll explain in a minute."

They walked to the Chevy and got in.

"I think it might be a good idea to drive out on Route 84," Boardman said. "I have a nice little place under my real name out in

the country."

Streeter started the car. "Your real name? Your name isn't Rufus Boardman?"

"Yes. But it was under another name I rented the apartment on Maple Avenue and took title to the Volkswagen. Which brings me to the favor you did me."

"*That* I want to hear about."

"The night you knocked me out and snatched the satchel, Mr. Streeter, you saved me from being taken into custody by a couple of T-men."

"T-men?"

"United States Treasury agents. While hospitalized I learned through an associate—a person I believe you saw conferring with me in a cafeteria—that two T-men, armed with search warrants, were waiting for me that night to return to my apartment."

"Warrants for what?"

"For counterfeiting currency of the realm."

"You mean to say the bread in that satchel was—"

"Bogus, yes. And sewed into the bottom of that satchel were the counterfeit plates for printing the twenties. So you see, Mr. Streeter, by preventing a person under an alias from reaching his apartment you saved the hide of the righteous Rufus Boardman."

"You're welcome."

"Late the following day my associate visited the apartment and found the restive T-men still there. They questioned him closely but fortunately he was clean. Meanwhile, one of the city's towing contractors had impounded the VW for overtime parking, thus severing any connection that might have been made between me and my recent alias. And of course the Feds never tell the local gendarmes anything."

"So explain somethin' to me, Boardman. Why the hell am I wheelin' you out 84?"

"I'm coming to that. Since his meeting with the T-men my associate is uptight. He wants to lay low a while. So I need a new front man. I think you fill the bill."

"Passing funny money?"

"Grade A counterfeit, Mr. Streeter. If you studied my work you'd know that. Did you have the chance, by the way, to look it over before the cops nailed you?"

"No, not really."

"What did you do with it? I know they didn't find it or we'd both have been in the soup."

"My wife took it while I was in the slammer."

"Took it where if I may ask?"

"To Mexico. On a vacation. With her boy friend."

Boardman nodded his porkpie head with mild delight. "Good. She did us both a favor, my friend. The Mexican authorities are rather unreasonable with counterfeiters. You're always guilty down there until proven innocent, and that almost never happens."

Streeter began to feel fine for the first time in weeks.

"Are we partners?" Boardman asked.

"Sure," Streeter said. "What have I got to lose?"

It was a rhetorical question that would be unequivocally answered a few months hence.

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*Van Poole had a peculiar knack for capturing the past. . .*

# VANISHING POINT

by H.  
EDWARD  
HUNSBURGER



The narrow staircase was coated with an even blanket of dust and litter. It looked as though it hadn't been used in years. Bogan went up cautiously so as not to mess up the shine on his highly polished brogues. In spite of his care dust exploded at every step. By the time he reached the fifth-floor landing, the shine was gone and he was thoroughly disgusted. As he pressed the bell he noticed a candy wrapper stuck to the cuff of his trousers. He leaned over to pick it off while

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his other hand steadily leaned on the bell.

"You can stop. The bell hasn't worked in years. Anyway, I heard you coming."

At the words Bogan rose to his full height. An old man stood in the now open doorway. He was smiling. Looking at him, Bogan wondered what he had to smile about. He looked to be on the wrong side of ninety and so thin that a strong wind would put him flat on his back. He was bald except for two clown-like tufts of hair around his ears. A yellow-white torpedo beard exaggerated the length of his narrow face. He was wearing a much-mended blue-flannel bathrobe over striped pajamas, both far too big for him.

"I'm here about the rent," Bogan said. "Or rather the lack of it. You're three months' behind."

"Mr. Delsolo?"

"Dead. Gone to landlord's heaven."

The old man shook his head. "A true patron of the arts, Delsolo. I must have missed the notice in the paper. Frankly, I'm a little out of touch these days."

"The rent," Bogan prompted.

"Of course. Please come in."

The apartment was one large room. Light poured in through a skylight of frosted glass, emphasizing the shabby condition of the overstuffed furniture. What took the room out of the ordinary was the paintings. There must have been hundreds of them—landscapes, portraits, and still lifes covered the walls and other canvases were stacked along the baseboards. There were so many that Bogan found it hard to focus on one. The multitude of images made him uncomfortable. He decided to get this business over with as quickly as possible.

"As of this date," Bogan consulted a slip of paper, "you owe me two hundred and ten dollars, Mr. Van Poole."

The old man waved a hand in the air. "I don't doubt it for a moment. I am at present rather embarrassingly short of cash. Mr. Delsolo and I had a mutually satisfactory agreement. When I was low on funds I'd do his portrait or else he would pick out a nice landscape for over the dining-room table—"

"No." Bogan's tone almost raised the dust from the furniture. "I'm running a business, not a swap meet. All that I'm interested in is cash. Either you come up with it or you'll be out in the street." He headed



for the door. "I'll be in the neighborhood again tomorrow night. When I stop in I'll expect the money—all of it."

The old man sat for a long time after the door had slammed. Finally he rose and went to his easel. He fit a large white canvas into place and after a moment's hesitation he began to sketch in a scene in charcoal.

The raw edge in the night air had no effect on Bogan's spirits. He could have been in the middle of a blizzard and not have noticed. Today he closed the deal. One of the largest corporations in America was going to make him a very wealthy man just because he happened to own the right piece of property at the right time. All he had to do now was to get Van Poole and the few other remaining tenants out of the building as quickly as possible so that the demolition people could begin work on schedule. As Bogan turned the corner he looked up at the fifth floor. The lights were still on in the old man's apartment.

"Good evening, Mr. Bogan. I wasn't sure if I'd see you tonight, the weather being what it is."

"I'm here."

"Yes." The old man smiled. He almost looked pleased that Bogan had come. He stepped back into the apartment and motioned for Bogan to follow. He produced an envelope from the pocket of his robe. "I was able to raise some cash after your visit yesterday. Not as much as I expected but it's something."

"How much?"

"Ninety-two dollars."

With a sweep of his arm Bogan knocked the envelope out of the old man's hand. Bills fluttered in the air and came to rest on the threadbare carpet. Neither man moved to pick them up. Finally Van Poole turned away and slowly lowered himself into a chair.

"Just what have you got here?" Bogan asked, his eyes taking in the room. "You've got nothing—no television, no stereo, no phone. Your neighbors don't care about you—they probably don't know you exist. You walk in this neighborhood after dark and there's a good chance you'll never make it home alive. You could have a heart attack right here and no one would ever know. Why don't you just give the place up? You'd be much better off in a home."

Something seemed to come into the old man's eyes.

"It's not just what you see, Mr. Bogan. There's much more to it than that. I used to be one of the most sought-after society painters in the world. True, I never ranked with Sargent or Augustus John, but I was good." The old man smiled. "This was my studio. The Vanderbilts, the Astors, Bernhardt, and Caruso all came up those stairs to be painted by me. I couldn't leave now. It's important that I stay where my memories are."

"Memories don't pay the rent," Bogan said flatly. "Listen, Van Poole, I don't want to be heartless, but I want you out of here. This piece of real estate is going to make me some money and you're in my way. I'll get you a nice efficiency in one of my other buildings."

The old man seemed not to be listening. "Do you like living in the present?" he asked.

"I'm here, aren't I? Sure I like it."

"No, no." The old man waved a skinny hand. "You miss my point. I'm talking about choice. Are you so happy here in the present that a journey to some point in the past has no appeal to you?"

Bogan laughed. "What are you trying to sell me, old timer? Whatever it is, I'm not interested. I'm not interested in a piece of the Brooklyn Bridge either. All I want is to get you out of this building."

The old man stood up. In the dim light of the single lamp his face seemed to change. He looked stern and slightly mad, like an Old Testament prophet facing down an angry mob.

"I'm not trying to sell you anything," he said. "In fact, I am buying. Buying just enough time to live my life out here in this apartment. You have nothing to lose by hearing me out." He turned toward the rear of the apartment. "Come along. There's a painting I'd like you to see."

Bogan was beginning to feel uneasy. It was much the same sensation he had experienced on his first visit. There were too many images. They seemed to be closing in on him, each one vying for his attention. He wanted to walk out the door, but he couldn't. He got slowly out of his chair and followed the old man.

Van Poole lit a candle on the sideboard and carried it along. He held it up in front of the rear wall so that a single picture was clearly illuminated. The picture captured in perfect detail the interior of a bar. It seemed somehow familiar to Bogan—the long bar, the booths against the wall, the gaudy jukebox in the far corner.

"Do you recognize it?" The old man's voice seemed distant.

Now Bogan remembered—it was Falcon's, a student hangout near Columbia. It burned down three years ago. He hadn't been there in ten years or more; but he had enjoyed some wild times there. He could hear the jukebox—Johnny Mathis—and smell the draft beer. Suddenly there was a sound like fabric being torn.

Bogan stood inside Falcon's Bar.

His first impulse was to cry out. He wanted to lash out, attack—as if by using physical force he could knock his way back to reality. He fought to control himself. Violence wouldn't do any good. This *was* reality. The people, the sounds, the smells were all around him, he was there. It had to be some kind of a trick, but if he kept cool he would learn what kind of game the old man was playing. He walked to the bar and ordered a beer.

He received a surprising amount of change back from his dollar. The beer tasted very good. Bogan looked at the ornate tap the bartender had drawn it from. It was a local beer whose brewery had gone bankrupt in '71.

"No, I didn't vote for him, but that's not to say I didn't admire the man. Whether you liked him or not, it's still a tragedy." The bartender was talking to a customer further down the bar. Although the place was crowded he could be easily heard. Strange, Bogan thought, in a place this packed.

"I never liked the idea of a Catholic in the White House but I have to admit I was wrong."

There was a murmur of agreement from the customers. The bartender went back to work, drawing a round of beer for a group of students at the far end. Bogan was beginning to feel the violence well up inside of him again. Violence mixed with fear. The bartender looked at the clock and then switched on a small television set suspended over the rear of the bar.

The picture slowly formed. A familiar face above an out-of-date narrow-lapeled suit. The sonorous voice of Chet Huntley. "Today in Dallas—"

Something in Bogan snapped. He grabbed a nearby man by the front of his windbreaker. "What day is today?" Bogan demanded.

"Hey, take your hands off me, buddy."

"What day is it?" Bogan's voice began to crack. "Tell me what day it is!"

"You're crazy." The man's eyes widened. "It's November twenty-second, nineteen sixty-three."

Bogan screamed. He threw himself against the man with the full weight of his body. They were on the floor. The man's face was turning purple. Bogan's hands were clutching his neck with maniacal strength. There was a swishing sound behind him and his brain seemed to explode with pain. Then it was dark.

"For your first trip back," the old man said, "it was not what I could call a complete success."

Bogan was beginning to focus. He was back in the old man's shabby apartment—back in his own time.

"What did you do to me?" he asked weakly.

Van Poole smiled. "It wasn't me. It was the vanishing point."

"The vanishing point?"

"That's what I call it. The vanishing point is really a device used in art. It's the place where the lines of perspective converge at a single point on the horizon. If you look at that spot in some pictures it almost makes you feel as though you could walk right into it. One day I found out I could do exactly that."

"You're trying to tell me that you can step into a picture and be somewhere in another time?"

"Tell you?" The old man laughed. "My little demonstration would be enough to convince any man."

"It's a trick. Some kind of hoax."

"Mr. Bogan, if I could afford to practice deception on that scale I would hardly be worried about paying my rent."

Bogan sighed. "O.K., so it's real. What makes you think I'm interested in traveling back in time?"

"Who wouldn't be? But if it fails to stimulate your interest, there is always the profit motive to consider."

"Profit! What do you have in mind? Organized charters to the Dark Ages? Low group rates?"

The old man raised his hand. "Hear me out. You can bring things into and back from anyplace you visit through a vanishing point—any object that you are able to carry by yourself. Think of the

possibilities—rare coins, *objets d'art*, valuable documents, first editions in mint condition. You could become one of the wealthiest men in the world in almost no time at all. Think about it.”

Bogan was thinking about it. The possibilities really were fantastic. But there had to be a catch to it. “If it’s so easy,” he asked, “why don’t *you* go back in time and return with enough to live like a king.”

Van Poole shook his head. “For one thing, I’m too old. It takes a young man to deal with the mental and physical strain of time travel. Secondly, this is where I belong. I’ve had a full life and plenty of memories. I’m not long for this world. I want to end my days peacefully here in this apartment.”

Bogan stood up. His head was feeling clearer now. He wanted to go home and figure out how he was going to make the most out of Van Poole and his vanishing point. He headed for the door.

“About the apartment?” The old man’s voice quavered slightly.

“We’ll work something out,” Bogan answered noncommittally.

After the sound of Bogan’s footsteps faded from the stairs, the old man returned to his easel. He uncovered the painting he had begun after Bogan’s first visit. The preliminary sketch was done. The old man now began to lay down the under painting. He stood at his easel far into the night. If he kept working at this rate the painting would be finished by the end of the week. He wanted to get everything over with as quickly as possible.

In the days that followed Bogan came to the old man’s apartment every evening so that he could travel back into time through a vanishing point. His initial excursions were very lucrative. He stole two jeweled Fabergé eggs by stepping into an interior Van Poole had painted of the Czar’s Winter Palace. A Paris street scene enabled him to buy an early Picasso at a ridiculously low price. Rare stamps, gold coins, and other objects that the passing of time had made valuable found their way into his safety deposit box on the morning after each night’s adventure. There was, of course, an element of risk involved. The old man had warned him that although he could travel in time, he should not start thinking he was immortal there. Anything that could happen to him in the present could also happen to him there. But Bogan was cautious. There wasn’t any reason why he shouldn’t make a fortune in a few months’ time. And it was easier col-

lecting valuables now because with each successive trip he was staying inside the picture a greater length of time.

"I picked up the clothes you suggested," Bogan said as he closed the door behind him. The old man smiled. Bogan was dressed in faultless black tie, the classic gentlemen's attire that had changed very little since the turn of the century.

"Well, where am I going tonight?" he asked impatiently.

"Back into American high society in the year nineteen-twelve. It should be a very interesting trip." The old man looked steadily at Bogan. "I was wondering if you had come to a decision regarding the apartment."

"Later," he said. "Where's the painting?"

The old man sighed. "Follow me." He lit a candle on the sideboard and held it up so that a single large canvas was visible in the pool of light. A young woman, a Gibson Girl type, was sitting alone in a splendidly furnished room. It was a romantic setting with rose-colored walls, gleaming walnut paneling, and a crystal chandelier. As the old man steadied the flickering candle, Bogan felt the now familiar sensation of traveling through the vanishing point. Sounds and smells altered and then finally there was the tearing sound. He was through.

The girl was alone in the room. Through an open door Bogan could hear the sound of ragtime music. The girl looked up as if she were suddenly aware of his presence. She had wide blue eyes, a creamy complexion, and rich auburn hair piled high on her head—a real beauty of another era. Idly, Bogan wondered what she looked like now, in real time as he liked to call it, or if she were even still alive. The girl smiled and Bogan bowed courteously. Then he noticed it, an out-of-place odor—salt in the air. He wasn't in a house at all. He was on a liner at sea.

Bogan smiled. From the look of the room he had just left it was a luxury liner, a good prospect for some first-class portable property. He moved down the deck to where a group of men in evening clothes stood by the rail. They were all quietly looking out to sea. As Bogan joined them he followed suit. Half a dozen pinpoints of light were spread out over the vast expanse of water. Bogan turned to the man nearest him. "Excuse me, is someone overboard?"

The question seemed to startle the man. He gave Bogan a searching look. "Overboard? Where have you been for the past three hours? The damn ship is sinking, man." Bogan gripped the rail as the realization of what was happening came over him. "What about the lifeboats?" he asked.

"They've gone with the women and children." The man glared at him. "And not even enough for all of them."

Bogan turned away. He had to get back through the vanishing point. How long had he been on this side? Ten minutes at the most. His last trip had lasted over two hours. If he could hold out long enough . . .

The ship lurched violently. Bogan was thrown against the rail. A group of men were visible at the far end of the deck, life jackets over blue uniform coats. Bogan staggered toward them. They were carrying musical instruments. The leader tapped a violin. They began to play. It was a hymn. Bogan recognized it, an Episcopal hymn called "Autumn." As Bogan began to scream, the deck seemed to come apart beneath him. He heard the crash of glassware and the clatter of deck chairs sliding down. He was swept over the side where he gave one long last agonizing scream before the ice-cold water closed over him.

The old man was tired. The painting had taken a lot out of him. It wasn't so much the work but the memories. After so long they were still very painful. He had rendered the scene with perfect accuracy just the way it had lived in his mind all these years.

He had walked into the room to find Julia still on board. She had given up her place in the last lifeboat, determined to stay with him no matter what happened. He had found her a life jacket and they had both jumped for it at the last minute. He had never seen her again.

Van Poole looked at the painting. He wondered how different life might have been if they hadn't been one of the thirteen honeymoon couples on board the *Titanic*.



*The burglar walked on two legs and was very clever. . .*

# THE PARK PLAZA THEFTS



I'd taken the call at the station and told Mrs. Martin to make a list of the missing items, and she was still working on it a half hour later when I got there. Over the phone she'd been fairly cool about the robbery, but at the door her elderly cheeks were damp with tears.

"They took everything," she said. "Things I've had all my life. My mother's—" She blubbered to a halt.

"Is that the list?" I said. A clipboard was cradled in her left arm and



she handed it to me blindly. "I'm Sergeant Peckinpugh. I talked to you over the phone. Why don't you make up a cup of coffee?" I figured it would help to give her a little chore, and it did. An aged beagle bitch limped along behind us to the kitchen.

She'd returned home from a two-week vacation five minutes before she phoned the station. One of the dining-room windows was partly open, a chair usually in front of it pushed aside, and she'd noticed it right off. Then she'd noticed the silver service wasn't on the buffet and called us. The silver service was the first of about ten items listed on the clipboard. A coin collection, jewelry, some cash from a jar in the kitchen, six antique guns from her dead husband's collection in the den, two Dresden china figurines, and two silver candelabra were also listed. Pound for pound, a lot more valuable than a TV set, for instance. They were worth almost three thousand dollars, Mrs. Martin guessed, and you could get it all into a good-sized pillowcase. It reminded me of a list of missing items I'd seen last week from a house about five blocks from Mrs. Martin's in the same solid upper-middle-class neighborhood.

The beagle was sitting on a throw rug in the open doorway between the kitchen and utility room, watching Mrs. Martin fix the coffee. I noticed its water dish was empty, and got up and filled it at the sink and put it back. The dog wagged its tail in gratitude and drank copiously.

"Oh, I forgot!" Mrs. Martin said. "Poor Trudy, she must have been dying of thirst."

Trudy nearly emptied the dish while Mrs. Martin told me for the third time that she knew—she absolutely knew—she'd locked that dining-room window and all the other windows in the house, and her son Harold double-checked everything before she left.

Trudy finished drinking and waddled to the doggy-door set in the bottom panel of the utility-room door leading to the backyard. She stood there for a moment with her nose against the top-hinged plastic flap of the door and then, with an old-bones effort, jumped through. A minute later, the job done, she returned and curled up on her pad on the floor. I excused myself to Mrs. Martin and went over and opened the utility-room door, went outside, and closed it again, first twisting the inside knob to the lock position. Then I sat down on the back stoop, reached my right arm through the doggy-door, and very easily

twisted the knob to unlock, got up and opened the door, and came back in. Mrs. Martin had been watching this procedure with her fingers splayed against an open mouth.

"Why, I never—" she breathed. "So that's how they got in! But the dining-room window—?"

"That's known as a red herring, Mrs. Martin," I said. "May I use your phone?"

Lieutenant Stanley Wells was thumbing through a brochure on the delights of Hawaii when I got back to the station at 5:30. For the seven years I've been on the Clausen police force he's been searching the literature and maps of the world for the ideal place to retire. But it's a game, a *divertissement*, as we used to say in Madame Gautier's French class. He was born here and he'll die here, and he knows it because his wife has told him so. And he'll never retire; it's not in him. It's just that he wishes Clausen had stayed the same size it was twenty years ago. He misses its lost innocence.

"Tomorrow," he said, setting the brochure aside, "get a haircut."

"Is it the first of the month already, mon General?"

"Do it!" he said. "What's this hot scoop on the Martin case that Escalera was talking about a while ago?" He lit a cigar ritualistically, rolling it in his mouth.

"It's not just the Martin case, boss, but all five of the Park Plaza thefts—my two and Escalera's three." I held up a finger. "Number one, they all had doggy-doors, and number two, they all got hit while on vacation. Number three, they all lost the same kind of stuff—smallish, light, and valuable—and number four, in all cases a window or door was left open to look like the point of entry."

"Why fake a point of entry?"

"To draw attention from the real point of entry—the doggy-door."

"Which means what, Sherlock?"

"It means that people with doggy-doors who go on vacation this summer are gonna get burgled. And now for the wonderfulest point of all, Leftenant, point number five—in each case the doggy-door was bought from the same store."

"You're positive?" It was beginning to interest him.

"Yessir. The thought crossed my mind halfway through the afternoon's work and I checked with Escalera, and then with each of the

victims."

"All right, Peck, what store?"

"Graham's Plaza Pet Shop."

"To which you are about to repair, I presume." He glanced at his watch. It was an hour past my quitting time, but since he never quits it's difficult for him to remember such irksome details.

"First thing tomorrow," I said.

The next morning I beat Graham to his shop in the Plaza by a half hour and sat outside on the curb, musing over things past. It was a bright clear morning, the smog five or six hours away from the first-stage alert level it would no doubt attain today, as it had yesterday. Approximately where I sat had been second base of the little-league ball-park where I'd made my first bad fielder's choice and socked my first homer. At that time it had been surrounded by lush green groves, a mix of the orange and avocado trees that were the twin symbols of Clausen Valley.

But this monstrous Plaza Shopping Center had obliterated all of that. Now there were thousands of houses in satellite suburbs where the dark green trees used to be, full—as Wells said every day—of dangerous strangers.

I belched—I'd had a pickle for breakfast. I live alone in the old family bungalow, a poor orphan boy.

Four stores down from Graham's, a barber pole began to turn and I got up and went down and told the man a little off the sides and back. "Just a trim," I said, "and I want a receipt."

Graham was indignant about it—in fact, furious. He said that if I thought that he had enough energy left after a long tough day with the dogs, cats, birds, fish, monkeys; and whatnot in his store to go about robbing people, then I didn't know the first damn thing about the pet-shop business. "With all these animals," he said, waving his arms at the walls, "I'm on all fours myself at the end of the day!"

"I didn't mean you personally, Mr. Graham," I said. "How about your help?"

He laughed bitterly. "What help? The last good man I had," he said, "the *only* good man I ever had, quit two months ago—just like that! He just didn't show up one morning after three years on the job—have you ever tried to hire somebody in today's labor market?"

"What's this guy's name?" I said, and he took me into his little office and handed me the ex-employee's personnel card. I said, "As long as we're here, tell me the name of everybody who's ever bought a doggy-door from you."

He pointed to a file cabinet and said, "Help yourself," and went back out into the tangy air of his shop to feed his barking, meowing, splashing, chittering stock-in-trade.

An hour later I had a list of 54 people who'd bought doggy-doors from him since he'd opened three and a half years ago. A bunch, I thought, and thanked him carefully on the way out.

Graham's ex-employee, Daniel Richards, was nowhere to be found. The address I had on him was Space 14 in an old mobile-home park near a freeway interchange on the east edge of town. He'd lived there until two months before in an ancient two-bedroom trailer with a retired uncle named Edward Richards, to whom I talked.

"He just up and left," Richards said. He was drinking a can of beer in the dinky little patio alongside his trailer. "He didn't take no more with him than the clothes on his back."

"In a car?"

"Well, this VW van he drives. What's he done, Sergeant?"

I sat down in the shade of the patched awning over the patio and refused an offer of beer. It was turning hot. "Nothing that I know of," I said, "but he might be able to give me some information I'm looking for. Was he alone when he left?"

"He was always alone. He's what you call a loner."

I looked at my notes—Daniel'd be 24 in August. "No-girl friends, Mr. Richards?"

"Well, he had this one girl, I guess, although I never seen her. She used to phone him now and again last spring, and I'd kid him about it the way you do." He finished his beer and crushed the can abstractedly in a powerful old hand. "But it'd embarrass him so much I quit doing it. He's a shy boy, Sergeant, not your typical hotshot troublemaker. And a good boy too. He was saving up to go to veterinarian school next fall up at Davis."

"Oh? Where'd he keep his money, Mr. Richards? Here?"

"No, down at the Clausen Savings and Loan. He put every second paycheck in there, regular as clockwork."

"Did he take his passbook with him?"

"As far as I know he did."

"How much had he saved? Enough for school?"

"Well, I don't know—" He ran a hand over a tan freckled scalp. "He always figured he had another year to work, but I guess he changed his mind."

"Maybe he came into some money or something. Or got some lined up for himself."

"Maybe he did, but I doubt it. He'd have told me." His sharp blue eyes squinted at mine. "You think something happened to him, Sergeant?"

"I don't know, Mr. Richards. What do you think?"

He shook his head. "I'll admit I'm worried. I haven't let myself really think about it until now. I don't know—"

"What's the girl's name?"

"I don't know. All I know about her is her voice—real sexy voice over the phone, real low, pleasing to a man's ear."

"How about friends, Mr. Richards?"

"Well, he really didn't have none that I know of. He went over to the coast now and again for surfing, and last winter he went to one of those karate schools for a couple weeks, but like I say, Danny's a loner."

"Parents?"

"My brother got killed in the service. His mother's somewhere in Canada, last anyone heard."

"When did this girl call last, Mr. Richards?"

"Just before Danny took off."

"Do you think there's a connection?"

"Damned if I know."

In the trailer he found a snapshot of Danny leaning against the back of his van, a surfboard sticking out the open rear window, the license plate on the engine hatch clearly legible. It would save a little time, that plate. Danny was a short slender man with more hair on his head than I fancy and a ten-inch-wide guardsman moustache that surprised me with its bravura touch. I pointed at it.

"Maybe he was only shy on the outside," I said. "That's quite a growth."

"Nope. It was a silly damn thing and he knew it. He kept it out of

mulishness.”

“Well, it might make him easier to find,” I said. “How about filing a missing-persons report on him, Mr. Richards?”

He said he didn’t want to. He said if Danny was dead it wouldn’t do any good and if he was alive it was none of his damn business where he went. I gave him my card and he promised to call me if he thought of anything else.

On the way downtown to the station, I passed the *Press-Sentinel* building and, heeding a baby impulse, pulled in. It was crowding noon and I snagged my old school friend, Ed Munsey, who was circulation manager now, and made him buy me lunch in the employees’ cafeteria.

“What I want to know,” I said at our little table in the noisy room, “is what happens when a subscriber cuts off his paper for vacation?”

“We stop delivery and resume it when ordered. It’s pretty complicated, Peck.”

“Yeah, I know, wise guy, but what I’m asking is what happens here in the plant. Who handles it?”

“Jean Romero, one of my most delectable assistants. In fact, my only delectable assistant. She’s that girl over there in the barely adequate red dress and the dark flowing hair.”

She was a dish and I let loose the expected low whistle. Ed grinned.

“Watch it, shamus,” he said. “She’s a karate buff, and she’ll break your groping arm with the edge of her hand.” He paused. “How come your brows went up just then, Peckinpaugh?”

“Did they? Who else knows when somebody goes on vacation?”

“The concerned district manager and the concerned delivery person—we have to say ‘person’ now because we’re using girl delivery boys. What’s up, Peck? You’ve got that awful cop look in your eyes.”

“What else does Miss Romero do? Is it Miss?”

“Ms., you barbarian. Well, let’s see, she handles most of the field problems with the district managers, delivers the complaints at night; and—let’s see—”

“You mean if one of the kids misses a delivery and the customer complains, she brings the paper out?”

“Right. What’s up, Peck?”

“Ed, can you get me the current list of people who’ve ordered their papers stopped for vacation? I mean without Ms. Romero knowing, and

I mean *particularly* without Ms. Romero knowing?"

"Well, sure, but you're spoiling my lunch, Peckinpagh. Am I to infer that she's into some kind of a bad gig?"

"It could be, but mum's the word, Munsey. This is police business now."

"You want the rest of my sandwich, copper?"

"No, but I'll want that list by this afternoon. Does Romero have a boy friend?"

"Thousands of them."

"What's this karate bit?"

"Hell, I don't know, but she's good at it. She really racked up one of the pressmen a couple weeks ago. She goes to this school over on Market Street. Level with me, what's going on?"

"Later," I said. "Get that list over to the station this afternoon, right?"

Lieutenant Wells said, "I though I told you to get a haircut, Peckinpagh."

I was prepared. "You did, and I did," I said, and laid the barber's receipt on his desk.

He looked at it and then at me. "You mean you *paid* for that? You got trimmed, Sergeant."

"Exactly, boss, exactly."

Escalera came in then with a report on his morning's work. He'd been checking pawn and antique shops within a reasonable range of Clausen, looking for the Martin loot, and had found nothing. "It's all in L.A. by now," he said morosely. "You could sell your grandmother's bones down there if you knew where to take them."

He was sweaty hot and miffed with himself for having missed the doggy-door connection in the thefts. He hadn't even noticed them, he said, and that always rankles a good cop.

We talked over the situation for a few minutes and then Wells summarized in his usual blunt way. "Romero tells Richards when the next mark is scheduled to go on vacation, right? Richards, probably in L.A. somewhere, comes over, hits the place, goes back and fences the stuff there. Then they split the take." His eyes swept us.

"We could get L.A. to find him on a don't-alarm basis," Escalera said, going along, "and keep him under surveillance."

"Sure, and we could write Washington too," Wells said, "but we don't have the time. I'm getting pressure on this thing. I need something now." Escalera grinned sardonically, and Wells went on, "O.K., Luis, your people have to riot in the streets to get a little attention, Park Plaza people just pick up their phones. Don't let's go into that again."

"Our day will come," Luis said, and you never knew with him whether it was banter or grim promise. About a quarter of Clausen's 80,000 people (present count, and growing) are Chicano—including Ms. Romero, I thought.

Outside the window behind Wells' head, visible through the orange interstices of the steel frame of the future police building across the street, a pale ivory cloud of smoke was ballooning slowly over the silhouette of the hills ten miles away. Another brush fire underway in the baked brown range to the east. Rainfall this season was half normal, and everything was tinder dry, including tempers.

"What do you think, Peck?" Wells said.

"I think we need some hard facts," I said. "Number one, we're not even sure Richards and Romero know each other—I mean, that karate hookup is pretty skinny; and number two, what makes us think he's in L.A., if it is Richards; and number three, how do we know he's even alive?"

"I wish to hell you'd quit numbering things," Wells said irritably.

"The process of an orderly mind, boss."

"Uno, dos, tres," Luis said. "*Y quatro, que es numero quatro*, Peck?"

Tim Bashaw knocked on the frame of Wells' office door just then and came in with an envelope for me. It was the list from the *Press* and I spread it out on Wells' desk next to the list of the doggy-door owners I'd compiled that morning. Two names appeared on both lists and we all looked at each other. "Grebs and Ellison," I said. "Grebs cutting off tomorrow and Ellison Monday."

"Well, the least we can do is call them," Wells said, "and tell them to lock their doggy-doors."

"Hah!" Luis snorted. "Have you ever looked at one, Lieutenant? You can push them in with your nose, if you want—locked or unlocked."

"All right, we'll tell them to board the damn things up."

"No," I said. "I've got an idea."



"Don't mention stakeout," Wells snapped.

"No stakeout, boss, just me. That's *numero quatro*, Luis. Whoever he is, I wait for him in the Grebs house starting tomorrow night, the first night they're gone. That's probably when he'll hit."

"What if he doesn't?"

"Then I hang in there."

"Jeeesh!" Luis said.

Wells leaned back in his chair and sighed wearily. Behind his head, the ivory cloud of smoke was twice as big now. Both Luis and I were watching it. "Well, it's all right with me," Wells said finally, "if it's all right with Grebs. But I'll want permission in writing from Grebs."

"A deal," I said.

Luis grinned at me. He was starting a three-week vacation tomorrow. "*Buena suerte*," he said in that ambiguous way of his.

The brand new (and almost offensively rich-looking) Clausen Savings and Loan building was on North Main about halfway from the station to the Grebs' house and I stopped there on my way out. Bonny Johnson's mother, Martha, had worked there for twenty-five years and practically ran the place. She was behind the counter studying the big new Burroughs machine when I walked in.

"Jeffrey Peckinpaugh!" she said in a ringing voice. "When are you going to make an honest woman out of my daughter?" Bonny Johnson was my girl, as we old-fashioned types say.

"When they repeal the equal rights amendment, Ma," I said. I laid the snapshot of Danny Richards on the counter between us. "Official police business today, Madame Johnson. Do you recognize this cat?"

"Certainly—the moustache. That's Daniel Richards. What's happened to him, Jeffrey? He hasn't been in for a couple of months."

"His account's still open, then?" It surprised me—most people take their money with them. Unless—

"I believe so. Has anything happened to him?"

"What's his balance, Martha?"

"I'm not supposed to tell you that without a—"

"Don't tell me. Just write it down on a piece of paper and I'll read it over your shoulder."

"All men are criminals," she said. She got a ledger sheet from a file,

stuck it in the Burroughs, and pushed buttons. The ultimate answer, which she wrote down and held so that I had to read it over her shoulder—she was being very literal about it—was an eye-opener: \$6,176.98. She crumpled the paper and turned toward me, her lovely 50-year-old blue eyes pools of innocence.

"Martha darling," I said, "how tough would it be for someone other than Richards to come in here and close out his account?"

"If I handled it, impossible. I know him by sight."

"What if one of your transient little helpers handled it?"

"Well, whoever tried it would have to have the passbook, of course, and a proper signature, but—"

"Martha, can you tag his sheet so that only you can cash him out?"

She looked dubious. "Well, I suppose I could, but—"

"Do it, Ma."

Now she looked alarmed. "Is someone apt to try it, Jeffrey?"

"You never know," I said, and patted her hand with real affection. "But don't worry about it."

Mrs. Grebs had promised over the phone that her husband would be home at 4:30 and he was—dog-tired and mean-eyed. I'd typed up a statement of permission for the project and he read it over three or four times and made me tell him the full story of the doggy-door caper before, finally, he signed it.

"You don't really know a hell of a lot about this case, do you, Sergeant?" he said sourly. "It appears to me you're fishing—in my pond."

"We don't know anything for sure, Mr. Grebs, that's true. But we think our theory is solid and I'm willing to bet a lot of my own time we're right."

"So in effect I turn my house over to you for two weeks, right?" His dog, a middle-sized poodle named Fritz, was growling at me softly from next to her master's chair.

"Hopefully just one night," I said. "Tomorrow night."

"Why don't I just nail a board over the damn door and be done with it?" Heat was building between us.

"We'd like a chance to catch this man in the act, Mr. Grebs. He's raised quite a lot of hell in your neighborhood."

He turned to his wife who'd been standing in the kitchen door.

"What do you think, Helen?"

"Well," she said, "you've had this 'Support Your Local Police' bumper sticker on the car for three years, Gerald. Now's your chance." Her voice was unloving.

He sighed. "O.K., we'll go along, Peckinpagh. But see that nothing goes wrong, or it'll be your ass."

"Pray for me," I said coldly. "And now let me look around."

It was a big split-level house full of the small portable expensive things our thief preferred, some of them three or four generations old, Grebs said, handed down on his wife's side. A dream hit for any thief. Back downstairs I had Mrs. Grebs sign the authorization and took a front-door key from my reluctant host before he could change his mind. I had the feeling they should take separate vacations, but didn't express it.

At the front door we both paused and looked at the smoke clouds building up east of town, like pale dry thunderheads.

"Jesus," Grebs said, awed. "I wonder what started it."

"A match, probably. Most of them are pure arson, Mr. Grebs."

"Maybe I'll just stay away," he said tonelessly.

On the way back downtown, I stopped off at Richards' place. It was 5:40. An idea had crossed my mind and it was such that I'd have to work it up fast or forget it. He was on his patio, beer in hand, looking at the smoke clouds, and I asked him if I could borrow his phone for a minute and him for an hour or so, and he was quick to say sure. Not much happened in his life, I imagine.

Inside the trailer I phoned Bonny and told her to call the *Press-Sentinel* immediately and complain about a missed delivery, and that I'd be there in about twenty minutes with an explanation and a guest for a drink.

Richards changed his shirt and ran an electric shaver over his chin, and at 6:15 I was introducing him to Bonny in her apartment and watching him brighten up, as men always do when they meet her.

"What's up," I said in answer to her question, "is this—Mr. Richards here heard a voice on the phone about two months ago and I want him to tell me if it's the same voice we'll hear from the girl who'll deliver your paper."

"Girl?"

"Yes, girl, as soon you will plainly see. Mr. Richards will stand right here against the wall, out of her sight, and you, my beauty, will engage the subject in enough chitchat for Mr. Richards to make a sound decision."

"The subject," Bonny said, "said delivery would be made about now, so maybe we'd better get ready." She smiled at Richards. "I'll fix you a drink," she told him as he melted away before her eyes, "and you don't need to stand, as our leader says, you can sit right there in that chair and be comfortable."

"Of course," I said.

Her apartment was the third back from the street in a two-story unit of sixteen. As I was watching out her living-room window, a car pulled up at the curb and in a moment Ms. Romero came trotting up the walk. "Ready!" I said, and Richards took his seat.

Bonny talked to her for a half minute, but Richards was nodding his head from Romero's first words. When Bonny closed the door, he said, "No doubt about it, that's the girl!"

I beckoned him over to the window to see if maybe he'd recognize her, but he was too slow. She was in her car and moving by the time he focused in, but he said, "Hey! I think I've seen that car." It was a fading green Porsche, about five years old. "There's one like that at the park—just like that, same color."

"Whose?" I asked.

"I don't know. It belongs to somebody in one of the little rental units out back, I think. I see it now and again coming in or going out. A girl drives it."

"How long's she been there?"

"I don't know, but I've been seeing the car for four or five months."

Bonny was still standing by the door, the paper in her hand, and a wry twist to her lips.

"Some dish," I said, "what?"

"Some dish," she agreed. "But I've never seen a colder eye in my life. Peck, there's something wrong with that girl."

"Maybe she hates beautiful blondes," I said. "Beautiful brunettes frequently do."

I was awakened in the morning by the acrid smell of smoke and got up coughing. The air outside my bedroom window was a marbled

blue-brown, the houses across the street ghostly behind its scrim. The wind had shifted during the night, blowing fire smoke in from the east. It was the worst I'd ever seen.

I got to the station at nine and checked into Wells' office. Hawkins and Jones, two of the night-side men were with him. There'd been a stabbing death at a Chicano wedding party at 1:00 A.M. and none of the forty guests had seen a thing. It would be a long and maddening case. Only Escalera could penetrate the macho maze of the Chicano community, and he was gone. Wells had been at it since 2:00 and when Hawkins and Jones finally dragged themselves away, he glared at me like a hurt bull. The air was full of brushfire smoke and bad vibes.

"I got the Grebs' statement," I said cautiously.

He didn't even glance at it. "You got nothing, Peckinpaugh! That gives you permission to fall asleep in a guy's house, that's all. Find Richards! That's what you've got to do. Put out an APB on him, or get that uncle of his to file an MPR, but find him! Put his picture on the wire, pull out all the stops, but find him. No more trick stuff, Peckinpaugh—find the man!"

"Yessir," I said.

In the communications room, I dawdled. I didn't want Richards found, I wanted him to walk into my arms tonight at Grebs' place. I wanted to feed him to Wells like meat. There wasn't enough to hold him on if we did find him, I told myself, and wasted three minutes listening to a technical analysis of the fire coming over the radio. By noon, this confident voice promised, heat would rise from the sun-baked desert to the east, drawing in cool moist air from the coast and clearing the Clausen Valley of smoke. Hallelujah!

I went out to my desk and phoned Richards and talked him into filing a missing-persons report on his nephew. I told him the alternative was an APB, which he liked even less. I told him not to hurry getting here. The MPR would take me partway off the hook with Wells and still keep my option open for tonight. I was beginning to want a collar on this thief more than I wanted a good gun-control law.

After Richards came and went, I spent the rest of the day looking busy and when Wells left at 4:00 P.M. I did too.

I let myself in Grebs' front door at 7:30, while there was still enough light left to set myself up and make my plans. The doggy-door was in

the lower panel of the Hollywood door leading from the kitchen to the patio and pool area beyond. He would come in that way and probably go to the dining room first to arrange his phony entrance and then begin his tour of the house.

I could take him at any point after he came in, but decided he should have at least one item of Grebs' property in his bag before I made my move. It would make a stronger case of it.

I would sit, I decided, on the lower step of the stairway leading to the bedroom level. From there I could see the kitchen door, most of the dining room, and part of the living room. I memorized the location of the light switches I might need, and checked the entire house again.

From the master bedroom I could see the wall of smoke, richly hued in the rays of the setting sun, roiling high over the charred silhouette of the hills to the east.

He came at 10:30, silent as a cat. I saw him before I heard him, his black shape deepening the dark of the kitchen door as it slowly opened. Instinctively my hand touched the bump of my gun in its shoulder holster, and I crouched lower on the stairs, blood sounding in my ears.

He stood for a moment in the kitchen, then moved swiftly to the dining room and opened a window. It was Richards; in the dim wash of outside light I saw that brave moustache sticking out from both sides of his face. It would be a piece of cake, I thought.

I heard buffet drawers whisper open and shut, the sound of rummaging, a thump as something went into the big black bag he carried. He was in business now, time to make my move. I got up and crept into the living room and stood in the arch between it and the dining room, my left hand reaching for a wall switch, gun in my right.

He was bent over an open drawer in the buffet. My fingers scrambled against the wall, missing the switch. He heard, turned, and leaped like a leopard. I said, "Police, hold it!" and went over backwards from a blow on the chest, gun flying. I rolled and came up on my feet and felt a fierce jolt of pain in my right shoulder as I was spun and slammed down again in a classic karate throw. He was a tiger. His shoe glanced off the side of my head as I rolled away and came up. It hurt. I grabbed him and drew him in like a bear and got a knee in the groin. I bent down and lurched away and took the edge of his hand on

my neck and the hard front of his upthrusting thigh on the side of my face. I was over on my back again, my head hitting something that rang bells—

My watch said 10:41. I hurt in many places. Bonny, who taught Phys Ed at Clausen Central High, had said I needed exercise. I was going soft. I said, look, there's no fat on this magnificent body and she said it didn't matter about the fat, I needed regular heavy exercise to get my heart rate up to 122 per minute for two minutes a day, every day. I said I lead a life of violence. She said you'd get murdered in a fight.

I rolled and pushed to a sitting position and had trouble remembering where I was and why. My name was—something Peck—Jeff—Peck—I got up and grabbed a chair to keep from going down again. What was this place? That's a door over there, open, and a slab of dim light. I went to it like a swimmer in a dream. Outside the air was cool. I closed Mr. What's-his-name's door. My car was where? Around some corner, up some street. That way—

I got out of bed at 6:30 and knew right off it was my own bed. And I knew my name—all of it. Jeffrey Peckinpugh, custodian of multiple pains. I groaned out loud at the incredible thing in the bathroom mirror—there wasn't a mark on it. It should have been lumpy with bruises, a study in dark colors, an object of horror. I felt it with stiff hands, found only a lump on the back of the head under the thick hair that Wells, in his envy, hated. Wells? Ah—Wells!

I was at my desk at 7:45. The clock on the wall told me so. There was a new pile of case folders on the desk with the name Escalera on the outside of each and for a moment I didn't know who or what an Escalera was. I opened the top folder. A rape case.

Wells appeared in front of my desk, looking strong. I'd heard coming in that he'd solved his Chicano killing last night, had the perpetrator downstairs in a holding cell, and had a signed confession.

"So nothing happened last night," he stated bluntly. "Right? You got stood up like I knew you would."

"Er."

"Now is it O.K. with you if we warn the doggy-door people? I mean, I wanna clear it with you first, naturally."

"Ah—"

"And now maybe we can get out an APB on Richards instead of this feeble little missing-persons thing you've got going."

"Why sure, Chief."

"Lieutenant, not Chief."

"Sure, boss."

"Not boss, Lieutenant."

"Certainly, Lieutenant."

"And now, Peckinpough, I want you to go see Richards' uncle and I want you to sweat him. You got that? He knows more than he's telling you, whether he knows he does or not, and I want him squeezed dry. You got that, Sergeant?"

"Yessir!" I stood up, activating seven distinct sources of pain, and said, "Ooomph" through my teeth, but he'd turned and stomped into his office.

Richards was on his pocket-size patio looking east at the rim of the charred hills. He wore a lightweight robe, and his little line of hair was unbrushed. "They got it out, by God," he said, and reminded me that a bad fire had come and gone. The sky above the hills was a clear morning blue. "You're early, Sergeant. Had breakfast?"

"What?" I was still a half beat off the rhythm of the world. "Oh. No."

"Join me."

I followed him into his trailer and he pointed me toward the tiny kitchen. "Coffee's down," he said. "Have a grapefruit if you want—good for the blood. There are doughnuts in the bag there. Have at it. Me, I got to shave before I eat—old habit."

He disappeared down a narrow hall and I picked a grapefruit from a wicker basket of them on the counter and looked for a knife.

*And stopped abruptly.* The grapefruit was small and soft and warm in my hand, and I-squeezed it gently once or twice and then dropped it like a hot rock and felt sweat pop out all over my aching body. It was a *breast*, that grapefruit, a human female breast! Last night for a fleeting instant I'd held a female breast in my hand and I knew then where it was and why, and the whole thing came together with a rush of blood in my ears that nearly knocked me down. "Romero!" I whispered, and then hollered at Richards that I'd be back and went pounding out of the place.



The Grebs' living room was a mess, but it didn't surprise me and I didn't stare at it long. The first thing I looked for and found was my gun, the barrel protruding from under a chair, and not far from it a six-inch fake moustache that didn't surprise me either.

Nothing in the disarrayed room, thank God, had been broken, and within five minutes not even Mrs. Grebs could have told that a 120-pound girl had beat up a 210-pound man in her living room; but she could have told in a trice that one of her valuable antique chaise-longue silver pouring vases was missing from her buffet in the dining room. A thousand bucks' worth, Grebs had told me in passing, and sweat flowed freely on my brow again. I was an accessory to that theft, and of the worst kind—dumb. I locked up and left the place fast.

I was back at Richards' at nine-thirty, still not entirely in gear, still sensing little time lapses and memory blanks, but clear on one point—I was in trouble. Richards was watering petunias on his patio. He saw me returning and put down his watering can with a frown. "Where in hell'd you go, man?"

"It's a long story," I said. I stared at him, not wanting to tell it, while his eyes tracked a car passing behind my back.

"There it goes," he said.

"What goes?"

"That little green Porsche."

I turned quickly enough to see its tail disappear around a bend and then took the last baby step back to being all here again, mad now, and not scared. "I want to use your phone," I said snappily, "and while I'm doing that you go find out what space Romero's in. It's even money," I added, "that she killed Danny, so put your heart in it."

I called Ed Munsey at the *Press-Sentinel* and found out she'd be on duty until around 12:30. The Saturday edition of the paper is delivered in the morning and the deadline for complaints is 11:00. It usually took her an hour and a half to deliver them, he said, and then she was off until Monday noon.

She was in Space 179, Richards learned, and had been since February, just about the time Danny took his two karate lessons. It was one of the 24-foot rental units at the far end of the big sprawling park. We got in my car and Richards guided me back to where it was, and we pulled under her parking canopy like we owned the place. I told Richards to stand watch and picked her door open in twenty seconds.

What struck me instantly was the absolute absence of the female touch. No aroma, no smell of powder, no touch of color, no frill, no flower, no nothing. It was a cell—sterile, cold, and superneat. To my far left was a double built-in bed, trimly made. A tiny john cubicle next to the bed faced a hanging closet across a narrow aisle. In front of me was the kitchen wall, and to my right a gimbal-rigged table slung before an upholstered bench that would fold out into another bed. Not a hair out of place.

At random, I opened a drawer in the kitchen counter and looked down at a Polaroid portrait of Danny Richards, so big and clear it startled me. I pushed it aside with my pick. Beneath was his Clausen Savings and Loan passbook. I lifted it out by the edges and opened it on the counter with the pick again. Inside the book was a folded *Press-Sentinel* letterhead. I opened it carefully by the corners. It was covered with practice signatures of Daniel H. Richards; some nearly perfect duplications of his signature in the book. Any time now, she'd make herself up as Danny and go for the money—

It was terrific circumstantial evidence that she'd killed him, but I couldn't touch it, not without a warrant. Any other way it would be inadmissible as evidence. I nearly cried putting it back the way I'd found it, in a carefully squared-away stack.

I found her black bag on a hook in the hanging closet and, in the bottom of the bag, Mrs. Grebs' silver pouring vase. I couldn't touch that either, for the same reason. If I took it now—as I almost desperately wanted to do—she could raise the question of where it had gone, admitting she'd stolen it from Grebs, and when the truth eventually emerged she could claim that all the evidence in the place had been discovered through illegal entry, and was therefore inadmissible. The worst she would face then would be a robbery charge, greatly to be preferred to first-degree murder.

Richards stuck his head in the door just then to say I had a radio call and I went out to the car, locking the trailer behind me.

"Peckinpough," I said into the mike.

"Where are you?" It was Wells, still sounding strong.

"At the trailer park with Mr. Richards. I was about to call you. I need a search—"

"Can Richards hear this?"

Richards was leaning in the window. "Yes—"

"Well—" Wells' voice changed to softer "—I think we've found his nephew. Dead."

Richards' eyes flinched. "Where?" I said. I gestured Richards to open the door and sit down.

"In a little arroyo off Davis Canyon."

"In the burn area?"

"Yeah, about an hour ago. A helicopter was making a low pass over the canyon and spotted this van. The pilot radioed the Sheriff and he sent a man out. The van is Richards' and so's the body in it probably. I want you to go there now and if Richards can handle it, take him along."

Richards nodded affirmatively, his jaw clamped tight. "He can handle it," I said. "We're on our way—but listen, boss, I want a search warrant on Romero and I want it fast."

"What for?"

"I think she's got some of the Park Plaza loot at her place."

"What makes you think so?"

"Damn it, boss, I'm sure!" My brow was wet again.

"How sure? You know how Bailey is on warrants—no guesswork."

"I'm a hundred percent sure."

There was a two-beat pause before he said, "You're not telling me the whole story, are you?"

"Can I tell you later, boss?"

"Is it solid?"

"Yessir."

"O.K., get going. It'll be on your desk when you get back. What's her address?"

I told him and then we moved out.

We had to walk the last 200 yards into where Danny's van was. The final tag-end of visible road had ended a quarter mile behind us, but if you drove a car further in than we'd gone it was only because you didn't want to drive it out again.

The burn-off had been complete. There wasn't a living thing left in sight. A few charred stumps of cottonwood, some still smoking in the quiet hot air, were all that remained of a trail of them that had run prettily up the narrow canyon floor. It hadn't been burned in living memory.

The air stank with the smell of charred wood and baked rock. Old man Richards was stumping along beside me, his chin up, his eyes narrowed against the hot acrid air.

The van was in a small draw off to the right of the canyon floor, slammed through the rocks as far as it could be made to go—hidden, before the fire, in a small stand of trees. The smell of burned rubber dominated the air immediately around the hulk.

Two sheriff's deputies, the M.E., and a lab man with a camera were there. The deputies were standing well behind the van, waiting; the M.E. was leaning through the open side door and the photographer was alongside him, camera up.

"It's Danny's all right," Richards said, and went to where the M.E. was bending over his work.

One of the deputies looked at me and said, "What gets me is how he got it in here—and why."

She, I amended silently. And why? Because there was a better-than-even chance it would never be found. I shrugged. "Who knows?"

"Is he your man?"

"I'd bet on it."

Richards came back and took a deep breath. He looked wobbly and I caught his arm. "It's Danny's boots," he said. "The rest—" He didn't finish. He pulled away from my grip and walked down the canyon a way and stood there.

The M.E. came out, pulling off soot-smeared rubber gloves, his glasses steamy. He took them off and wiped his forehead. "What I can tell you for sure right now," he said, "is that the fire didn't kill him. I think he's got a broken neck." He lit a cigarette and threw the burning match to the ground and watched it go out.

"How long dead?" I said. "You just broke the law, Doc."

"At the moment, Peck; your guess is as good as mine. Sue me."

"Two months, maybe?"

"Could be."

I looked at my watch and was startled. It was 11:20. Ms. Romero could be through with her work in an hour or less and I wanted to be there when she got home. I went to the van and looked briefly in the side door. He was on his back behind the blackened driver's seat, head to the rear. His western-style boots, oddly almost intact, had two bright silver stars embossed in the tan leather of the pointed toes, a

sad epitaph for a young man who would have made a good vet someday if he hadn't thought he'd like to learn the martial arts.

"There's no way," I said to the M.E., "he could have come in here alone, is there?"

"Not with a broken neck, he couldn't."

"Well," Richards said, "I guess I'd better try to find his ma now. It seems only right the woman who brought him into the world should know he's dead." He'd gotten out of the car at his place and closed the door. "She did it, didn't she, Sergeant, that Romero woman?"

I nodded. I was itchy. I wasn't sure I'd beaten her back. I had the warrant in my pocket. It was 12:15.

"Can you prove it?"

"I think so." He saw the uncertainty in my eyes. The case against her was circumstantial at every point, and on the stand she'd use her good looks and guile and maybe beat the rap. "We'll get her," I said. "I promise."

Her parking space was empty—I'd beaten her home. I drifted on past, parked a hundred feet away, came back and let myself in. There wasn't a soul in sight. The neighbors were all inside their aluminum cells watching the ball game, swamp coolers thrumming away like distant freeway traffic.

She hadn't been back; nothing had changed since I'd left. I walked down the narrow aisle between the john and the hanging closet and sat on her bed. I took off my jacket, unholstered my gun, wiped sweat from around my eyes, and waited in the warm motionless air.

It wasn't long. I heard the Porsche turn in and stop, the door open and close, her heels clack across the concrete slab, the tick of her key touching the lock; and then a long spell of silence.

I leaned forward, ears cocked, heart slamming around. It was too long now. She'd rigged something I hadn't seen over the seal of the door, a hair, a thread, something I hadn't seen when I came in the first time; something no longer there. I took a deep breath and sensed danger as I've seldom sensed it before.

Behind my back, the small window illuminating the bed area was curtained and closed. She couldn't see me through it if she tried, but she'd know that if I was in the trailer at all I'd be where I was. Then the key ticked again in the lock and the door opened wide, light flood-

ing the kitchen area.

She came in low to the floor. I saw her gun first, spitting fire, the bullet smashing through the john door at a slant. I hollered, "Hold it! Police!" as she came further in, her gun spitting again—this shot going through the hanging closet to my right. My gun, fired an instant after hers, hit high on her left shoulder. She rolled away and I hollered again, but she was in it to the end. She came up firing, two quick shots as my second bullet entered her chest six inches below her chin, blowing her against the gimbal-rigged table, her legs twitching for a moment on the trailer floor.

Outside, I heard someone scream.

By 2:30 all the official personnel had gone, along with the body, and the crowd outside had dispersed in the boiling heat of mid-afternoon. Only Wells and I remained, seated on the dining bench. He shoved a cigar in his mouth and looked at me a long time.

"How do you feel?" he said finally.

"Beat," I said. "'Spent' is the classier word."

"But still a little sassy, huh?"

"I don't mean to be, Chief."

"It just comes out that way, doesn't it?" He lit the cigar and threw the match out the door. "Now," he said, "I want you to tell me all about this affair and I want you to leave nothing out. You got that?"

"I'll be glad to," I said truthfully, and started at the beginning and ended up with the way the shots had gone.

When I'd finished, he looked solemn. A false face, I thought, for the week's work had gone well for him—two murders solved and the Park Plaza thefts at an end.

"She probably figured," he said, "that you were the guy in the Grebs' house last night and if she killed you here she could plead self-defense, or claim she thought you were a rapist."

I nodded. "She had that kind of a mind. Cunning as an alley cat. A psychopath."

He blew smoke at me. "It looks as though more things went right than went wrong, despite your best efforts to the contrary. One of these days you'll learn to respect procedure and then you'll be a good cop."

"Yessir," I said.

"So what I suggest is this—take the Grebs' piece back out to their house and put it where it belongs. And don't mention it in your report. Then keep your fingers crossed."

"Yessir," I said.

"And on your way back—"

"Yessir?"

"Get a haircut, goddamn it!"

"Yessir!"

He left and I got up and went over and got my jacket from the bed and the black bag from the hanging closet. I closed the place up and was walking back toward my car when I noticed the bullet holes in the bag, an entry hole and an exit hole—low down where the bulge of the vase was.

I stopped in mid-step and gulped hot air for a moment and then moved on. Maybe it went through the space where the handle is, I told myself, but I couldn't bring myself to open the bag and look.

It was in the hands of the gods, anyway, like everything else.

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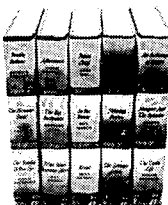
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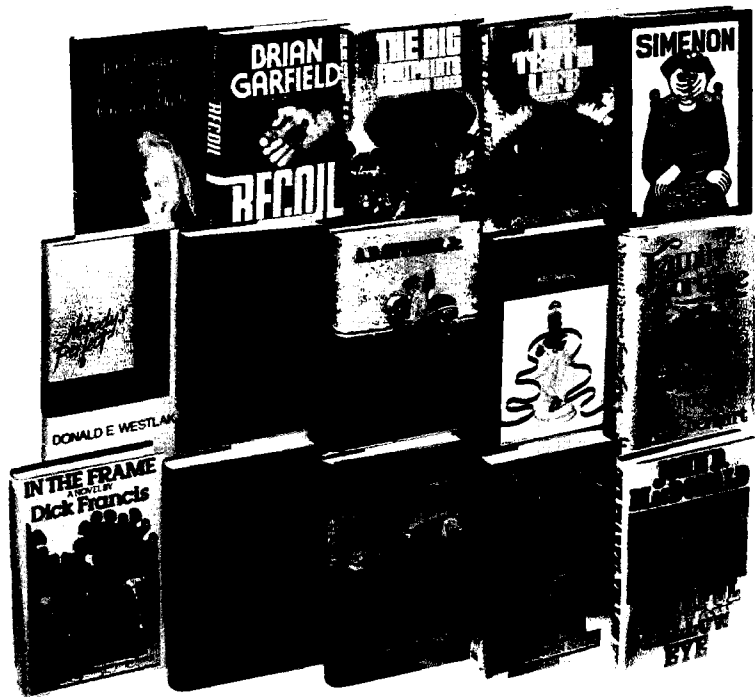
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